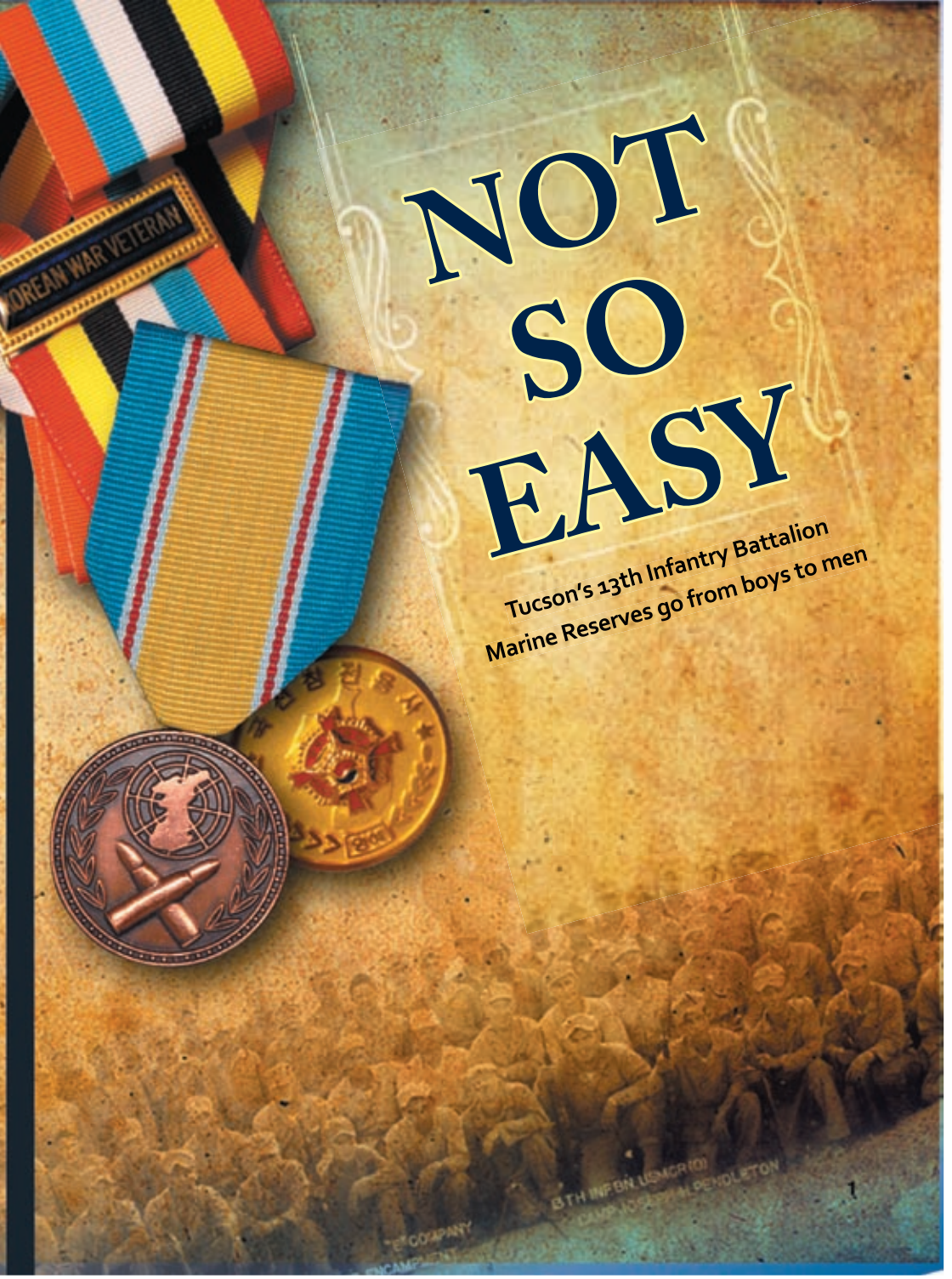

NOT SO EASY

Tucson's 13th Infantry Battalion Marine Reserves go from boys to men


"E" COMPANY
SUMMER ENCAMPMENT
MAJOR T. J. O'MARA

Not so Easy

Tucson's 13th Infantry Battalion Marine Reserves go from boys to men

Foreward by Raul H. Castro
Introduction and compilation by Charles Sanderson
Coda by Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez

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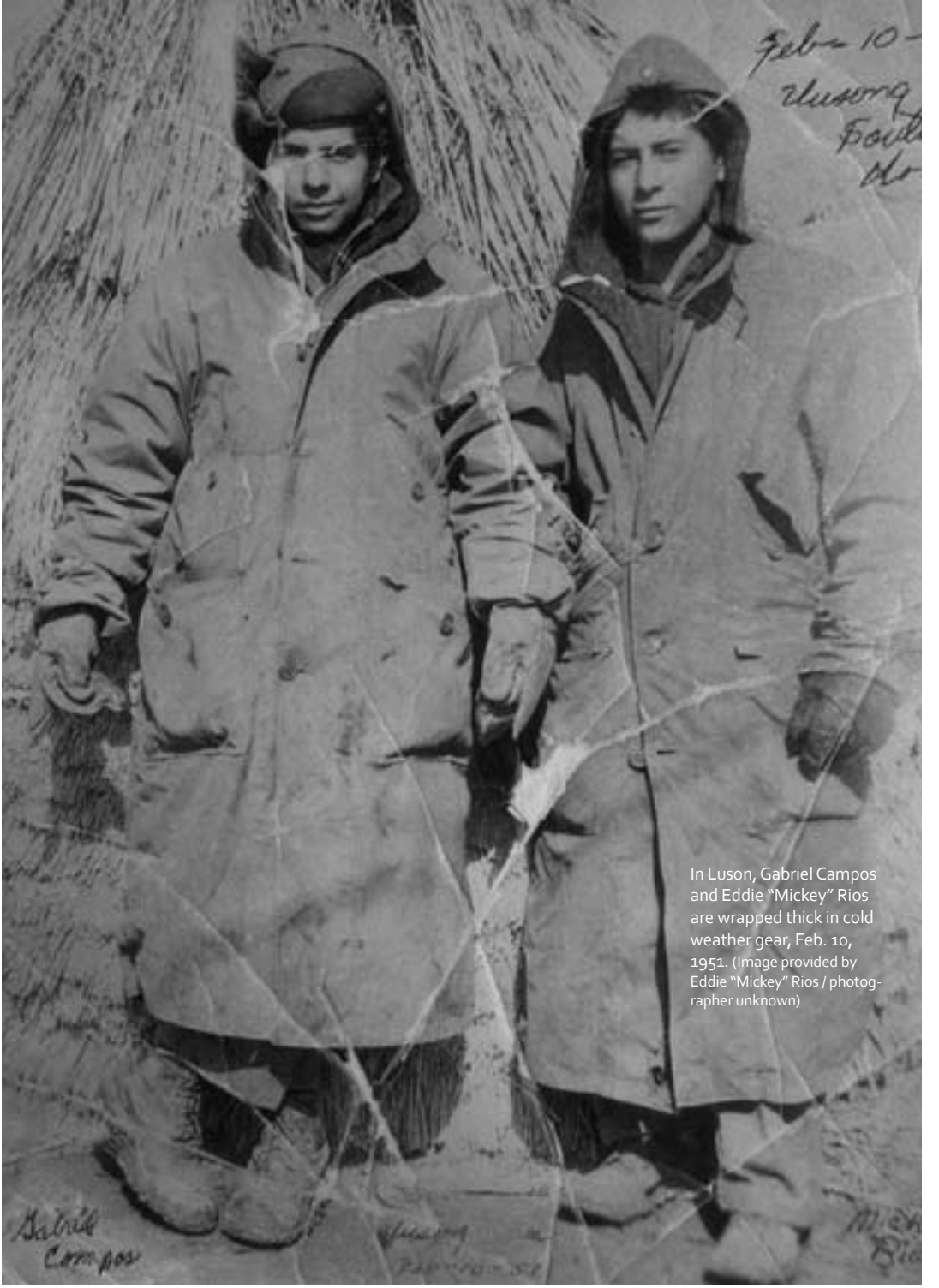
Inside cover: "E" Company Marine Corps Reserves,
13th Regiment at Camp Pendleton Summer camp, 1949.
(Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)



In Luson, Gabriel Campos and Eddie "Mickey" Rios are wrapped thick in cold weather gear, Feb. 10, 1951. (Image provided by Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

PREFACE

As we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Korean War, we had the opportunity to visit with Company E veterans. Their memories of Korea are vivid, and their stories of struggles and camaraderie were as moving as their adventures at Camp Pendleton were amusing. They told us about friends and neighbors who, back in the '50s, lied about their age in order to sign up for the Marine Reserves; of fellow Marines who recently died; others who died long ago; and still others whose memories have faded as the years have gone by.

As we worked on this project, yet another member of Easy Company passed away, Tucsonan Dr. Jimmie Fisher, who served as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve for 23 years. We witnessed the sadness of his fellow Marines, but were also able to partake in Gilbert Romero's excitement and trepidation as he revisited the soil upon which he fought and was wounded 60 years earlier. He joked that he was going back to Korea to "find my teeth."

We applaud Ruben Moreno, Rudy Lucero and Annie M. Lopez for having the foresight to preserve an important part of Tucson's history. We are reprinting excerpts of some of the oral histories they collected as a salute to the greater effort of the E Company Reserves and Tucson Marines.

We want to thank the leadership of the Marine Corps League, Tucson Detachment 007, especially Anna Marie Arenas, a member of its board of directors, as well as the veterans and individuals we interviewed for this project who shared their insights, memories and mementos. Our gratitude goes to former Governor Raul H. Castro, Joe Alvarez, Harold Don, councilman Richard Fimbres, Tom Kleespie, Eddie Lovio, Rudy Lucero, Ruben and Irma Moreno, Marty F. Ramirez, Gilbert Romero, Dr. Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and the librarians at the University of Arizona. Thanks to them, the Tucson link to the Korean War is being shared with future generations.

Veterans Day 2010

Raul H. Castro Institute
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Latino Perspectives magazine

LST'S unloading at Wolmi-do, Inchon, Korea on D-plus and Marine trucks taking supplies to advancing troops. (*National Archives / 127-GK-234P-A408288)*

FORWARD BY GOVERNOR CASTRO

The Korean War is sometimes called "The Forgotten War." It would be unconscionable to "forget" the bravery and sacrifices of those Americans who served their country in a land so far away.

These are the stories of Company E of the 13th Infantry Battalion, United States Marine Corps Reserve. Activated in 1950 and officially nicknamed Easy Company, more than 100 Company E troops served in the Korean War. Most of these Marines were from the barrios of a town I hold dear – Tucson, Arizona. I know these Tucson neighborhoods and the hardworking, admirable and determined people who have deep roots in the community.

I lived in Tucson for more than 25 years as a young lawyer and, with the support of the people of the Old Pueblo, began my political career there. As a *Tucsonense*, it is a special privilege for me to introduce these Korean War tales of courage, hardships and achievements of the men of Easy Company. Their many Silver and Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts attest to their fortitude and daring. The stories of Easy Company cannot be forgotten. They honor true American heroes.

Raul H. Castro
United States Ambassador to El Salvador 1964-1968
United States Ambassador to Bolivia 1968-1969
Governor of Arizona 1975-1977
United States Ambassador to Argentina 1977-1980

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Eddie "Mickey" Rios was one of several high school boys to join the new 13th Battalion Marine Corps Reserve that had formed in Tucson, 1948. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

They were just boys...

They went from Tucson's warm desert heat to a biting cold that froze blood and stranded them between bone-jarring mortar shells and the heartbreaking loss of friends and limbs. They changed from high school boys to U.S. Marines before their 20th birthdays. The Korean War took their youth and turned them into men, for better or for worse.

Decades after the experience, many still had not told anyone what happened to them on the Korean peninsula in the early 1950s. Some of the men have disappeared over time, moved away or passed on. But, in 1994, one of the veterans started collecting their stories. Ruben Moreno began recording interviews with the other surviving members of Tucson's Easy Company, 13th Infantry Battalion Marine Reserves. Moreno listened with the ear of a fellow soldier who had seen the bullets, felt the cold and shared the experience of Korea. Memories and stories welled up and sometimes so did tears.

Moreno recalls the conversation that incited him, "When the Descendientes del Presidio de Tucson (Descendants of the Tucson Garrison) was organized, Patricia Preciado Martin suggested that it would be valuable if the membership got involved in Hispanic oral histories. A committee, headed by Annie Lopez, was formed with that in mind. I remarked to Rudy Lucero that I would like to have someone write the histories of members of E Company.... The next thing I knew, Rudy presented me with a tape recorder and instructions for conducting interviews. With an incentive like that, it was impossible to back out."

Prodded by his wife, a docent at the Arizona Historical Society Museum, and genealogist Dr. William C. Kleese, Moreno self-published the stories as a booklet, so all could read about Tucson's contributions to the aptly named Forgotten War in Korea.

SO, WHO ARE THESE SOLDIERS?

The story Moreno documented begins in 1948. A 20-year-old Ruben Moreno had served in the Navy Reserves for a short stint. Returning home, he heard that several buddies were joining a

local Marine Reserves that had been started the year before by a few World War II veterans. Word was going around Tucson High School as well. Somebody mentioned the military would give out new green shirts printed with "U.S. Marines" and a sharp new pair of boots to those who signed up. Other kids said there were two meetings a month and they would be paid $2.50 for each they attended.

Closer to the truth was that everyone from the *barrios* was joining because so many of their friends were. Their older brothers had served during World War II and came home heroes. As if it were the "in" thing to do, 16- and 17-year-old boys were signing up for the Marine Corps Reserve. Most of the boys were students at Tucson High School. But many came from Safford, even a few who lived on the nearby Indian reservation.

When school ended, the first batch of recruits went to Camp Pendleton, 38 miles north of downtown San Diego. It was no boot camp; they only learned the basics and had fun.

Eddie "Mickey" Rios remembers, "They show you how to fire a rifle for a day maybe. We shot an M1 [Garand] and BAR [Browning automatic rifle], threw a couple grenades sometimes."

The boys learned a little self-discipline and practiced marching drills.

"We played at bein' soldiers, I guess," recalls Ruben Moreno. "It was a bunch of friends. We all went in a group, so ... we always had somebody to team up with. Of course, I had some relatives out there, too, so that helped."

A world away from these fledgling soldiers, Korea was changing. Since 1910, the country had been under a tight Japanese colonial rule that grew bloodier into the 1930s as Koreans challenged their oppressors. Korea finally found success when China backed their efforts in 1941, as Korea declared war on Japan two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In September 1945, a month after Japan surrendered to allied forces in World War II, U.S. troops landed in the southern part of Korea.

The country was rudderless without a government. Quickly an agreement was reached between the United States and the Soviet Union to split Korea in half along the 38th parallel. Each country would occupy their respective portion, with the goal of establishing a government that could eventually stand on its own. Fate took a different path.

As provisional governments were set up in the north and the south, relations between the USA and the USSR chilled into what would be called the Cold War. As elections were scheduled, it was obvious that the two superpowers wanted different leaders

and a very different government.

As South Korea elected its first president, Syngman Rhee, U.S. troops had begun leaving per a United Nations mandate. South Korea's new Republic of Korea government formally took power on Aug. 15, 1948. On Sept. 9, the Democratic People's Republic took control of the north with Kim Il-sung as its first prime minister. Each government claimed sovereignty over the other half of Korea. A collision was inevitable.

In 1949, the Tucson boys went to a second summer camp as more boys were joining. They were oblivious to world events that would soon come crashing into their own lives.

On June 25, 1950, one year after the final U.S. troop withdrawal, North Korea made a move. At 4 a.m. on a Sunday, bullets began cutting through an early morning rain as North Korea's Democratic People's Republic Army attacked the Republic of Korea (South Korea). It took them only four days to overrun the south.

A month after the invasion, the U.S. military issued orders to send the 1st Marine Division to war and sail for the Far East between the 10th and 15th of August and be ready to deploy by Sept. 15. It was a massive task, with most military equipment either mothballed or out of production. The division had to prepare and launch 15,400 ground troops along with the additional equipment required. Nineteen ships of all classes were pulled together for the trip and to serve in the region. Much of their equipment was from WWII.

NKPA (North Korean People's Army) Gains, Jun. 30 - Aug. 1, 1950. (U.S. Naval Historical Center / *The Inchon-Seoul Operation*, Volume II, *U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, 1950-53*)

Nobody expected another war so soon. Nobody wanted to even *think* about a war. Still, it was happening. On July 19, Tucson's Easy Company became the first Arizona troops called to active duty. The boys were offered deferment if they were still in high school or had started college. Not one accepted. All but three of the young soldiers boarded a train at the Southern Pacific Station on July 31, bound for Camp Pendleton.

Nearly 80 percent of the boys were Mexican-American. Their families filled the station to say goodbyes and it was front-page news in Tucson's Arizona Daily Star. The families fell quiet as the train rolled out of the station. Mothers and brothers who had served in World War II, knew those innocent faces looking down from the train would see tragedy, fear and bloodshed.

Harold Don recalls what many boys thought – or hoped – at the time, "We're just reserves. They won't need us."

Three stragglers – Jim Huebner, Ray Zimmerman and Oscar Paredes – showed up late. They hopped into Zimmerman's new Plymouth and drove through the night so they could join the other boys in San Diego. They and the other young Marines on the train were leaving a close-knit world, families who were the very roots of Tucson's rich culture, and speeding to an unknown future.

In a photo released by the U.S Navy, The USS Noble was one of several ships that carried Easy Company Marines to Kobe Japan and to Inchon, Korea. (US Naval Historical Center / Photo # NH97122)

ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Less than a month passed between the young soldiers' arrival at Camp Pendleton and their departure for Korea. The U.S. military was wasting no time.

Easy Company was called into formation. Tucson's Gilbert "Niggie" Romero was one of the boys who had attended the camps in the summer of 1948 and 1949.

He remembers, "In '50, when we got there, they stood us out and said, 'Whoever had two summer camps, take a step forward.' We said, 'Oh man! We're gonna train! We're goin' to boot camp.' Next thing, we were in the mobile going overseas."

Easy Company was quickly broken up and its soldiers scattered throughout the 1st Marine Division to augment its forces, mostly because so many in the group were brothers and cousins. Several soldiers were held back for boot camp until their next birthday, because their mothers had sent letters after hearing the Marines would not send underage soldiers into battle. The rest of the soldiers were loaded onto the USS Noble, USS Jackson and several other ships headed for Kobe, Japan. With no boot camp to ready the new recruits, many practiced

E Company Marine Corps Reserves sign in to be sent to Camp Pendleton in preparation for the Korean War, July 1950. (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero, clipping of published photo by Jack Sheaffer, *Arizona Daily Star*)

zeroing in their rifles on flying fish and learned how to take apart their guns as the ships sped toward Japan.

On Sept. 1, 1950, the first ships arrived – just in time to batten down for Typhoon Jane.

There were a lot of warehouses around where we were docked," Niggie recalls. "We couldn't go up on deck. We were almost to the bottom of the ship. When we got up there, all the warehouses were gone. All that was there was just the foundation."

The docks were flooded. Several ships broke their moorings, floating dangerously through the harbor. Others had to be held in position by smaller boats that pushed against their hulls. The cargo ship Whiteside's propeller had broken and it was drydocked for repairs. In the Washburn's engine room, rivets had broken loose. The SS Noonday sent a distress call that a fire had broken out in the clothing hold next to two holds full of ammunition.

Deployment day was getting closer.

On Sept. 8, another 500 men were discovered to be under 18 and sent ashore to Kobe where they could be sent for boot camp. Other men practiced drills for the remaining days to deployment.

The next day a tropical depression had turned into Typhoon Kezia. Troops bound for the beaches of Inchon would surely be tossed about in the tempest. Then, luck prevailed. The storm curved north and away from Inchon; the U.S. troops moved forward through the tail of Kezia toward Inchon's beachhead.

Seasickness was rampant. The ships rode through waves that crested well over 25 feet. As one ship topped a wave, it could look straight down at the next ship coming up the trough.

Harold Don recalls it clearly, "That was something. You'd get these great, big swells. It's like hills ... you're on top of one hill. You can see other ships, some going halfway down, some way at the bottom, some at the top like you are. You start going down like going down into a big ol' pit ... I'd never experienced anything like that before. It was really awesome."

The troops finally landed. For some of the young Easy Company Marine Reserves of Tucson, it was the first time they had ever fired their guns. They had gone from "playing" at being soldiers to on-the-job training in a dangerous profession.

ESPRIT DE CORPS

This was a new military. Two years earlier, President Truman had desegregated the Armed Forces with Executive Order 9981. But war is the greater equalizer. The threat of death can melt away divisions between two groups, opening doors of acceptance, uniting them in the task of survival. With no time to smooth over the rancor among the new racially integrated military, the soldiers fought on.

Any remaining distrust of the Mexican-American soldiers was dissipated in the cold hills of Korea, replaced by freezing fears of being bayoneted in one's foxhole. Gilbert "Niggie" Romero remembers how white soldiers' concerns changed.

"Some ... wouldn't communicate with you," he says, "until they knew that when they got hit real bad, they either gotta sleep with you in the foxholes ... They'd start getting friendly 'cause then they started thinking, 'Well, hey, I need them otherwise I'm gonna sleep by myself.'"

Ruben Moreno recalls the Mexican-Americans were seen as bold soldiers, "Tell you the truth, most officers preferred to have the Mexicans on their company or unit because they thought they were very brave. I mean, we were scared shitless, too, but we did it anyway ... charging the guns.... Of course, in combat they kinda shied away because these guys are gonna be where the bullets are!"

Gilbert "Niggie" Romero certainly seemed to be everywhere the bullets were. His leg was bloodied by shrapnel in a March 1951 firefight. That was

only the beginning. In April, a bullet shattered his chin and ricocheted out through his armpit. He caught a bullet when Chinese troops brought down the helicopter that was airlifting him to a MASH unit. After a shaky landing, the men hand-carried Niggie and another Marine down the mountain to a convoy. He caught yet another bullet when the convoy was ambushed on its way to the field hospital.

Medical corpsman Tommy Fisher of Tucson saw Romero and almost didn't recognize him. He put a devotional scapular into Niggie's hand and quickly gave him his last rites. It must have been a shock when Fisher, himself wounded a month later, encountered Romero still breathing in a Japanese hospital. Romero had woken up to find the scapular in his hand, without a drop of blood on it. After 60 years and 29 surgeries, he carries it with him to this day.

Though the Tucson boys were strewn across different parts of the 1st Marines, they would still connect on the battlefield, giving a thread of familiarity to an unwelcome landscape.

Eddie Lovio remembers, "There was a Tucson guy in just about every outfit. You could yell out to a group of marching Marines, 'There anybody from Tucson?' and they'd yell back, 'Yeah!'"

Eddie "Mickey" Rios recalls similar moments, "We crisscrossed once in a while when we were over there, and when somebody got either wounded or killed,

Mel Compton, of Phoenix, Arizona, was a photographer for the Sun News, When he walked past the troops he asked if anyone was from Tucson. Several replied and he pulled them together for this photograph. Shown here are, left to right, Walter R. Holder; Gilbert V. Orduno; Marty F. Ramirez; Eddie Lopez; Jim Roberts; Gilbert Jayme; Eddie S. Rillos; Eddie E. Rios; Robert C. Quiroz; Bert Rincon; Enrique C Trujillo; Ray Rios; Freddy R. Grijalva; Richard Noriega; Oscar A. Salcido; Gilbert V. Romero; James M. Wood; Henry V. Valdenegro. (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero, Sun News / Mel Compton)

the word would pass pretty quick... That was good and not so good, especially when the guys got hit or killed."

Spirits lifted in the brief moments when the soldiers received mail. The letters would be read aloud to fellow Tucson buddies who hadn't heard from home, and care packages that families sent were shared as well. One amusing moment came with a Christmas package Niggie got from his mother. Ruben

A Christmas card to the families back home, circa 1950.
(Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero)

Moreno related the story for Tom Kleese's Korean War documentary "Unforgettable."

"We were always on the move, and by the time the mail caught up with us, it was ancient news," he says. "Niggie Romero, he got some tamales from home, green tamales. Not green "*corn*" tamales but green tamales 'cause the *chile con carne* tamales had turned green from the moss growing on them. He got them and he was ready to throw them away and Harold Don, the only Chinese we had in the company, said, 'No, no, no! Don't throw them away! We can make them good.'"

Romero scraped off the green moss, put the tamales in a pan to heat and the men shared the meal. Today Niggie jokes that maybe they were eating penicillin and it saved their lives.

Many soldiers avoided bullets, mines, grenades, bayonets and mortars. But no one could escape the cold weather. It is the best-known and most enduring experience of the Korean War and haunts the men to this day. Eddie Rios still has to put on extra socks and blankets at night because his body shivers terribly in a chill. Harold Don's toenails are deformed from frostbite. Ruben Moreno holds out his hands to show fingernails still blackened from the damage. These were the lucky soldiers. Niggie Romero recalls a friend, Earl "Tiny" Collins, who was once well over six-feet-tall. Frostbite robbed him of a leg and several fingers. In 1998, decades after the war, his other leg was amputated.

Eddie "Mickey" Rios remembers holding dying soldiers in the cold. Sometimes the cold was a godsend.

"I saw a lot of my buddies ... buddies that got hit. I would hold them and

couldn't do a damn thing about it.... I used to hold them as long as I could. Good thing it was freezing, because sometimes it would freeze the bullet wound, it was so damn cold. And that was good for them. It just stopped the blood."

COMING HOME

As the war became a stalemate, tours of duty ended and, at last, an armistice was reached in July of 1953. The Easy Company soldiers began returning to the warm desert they had left when they were so young, just three years before.

It does not take long to learn the legend of how Korean War veterans returned to civilian life with no fanfare, parades or ticker tape. They stepped off the returning boats and drifted back into normal life.

Eddie Lovio remembers his quiet arrival, "I think it was a Saturday night. They told me there was a dance at one of the veterans' organizations. I got dressed up and went to the dance. A guy comes over and says 'Hey Ed. Where you been? I haven't seen you in a long time.'"

Lovio pauses before sharing his response. "'Oh, I've been away.' That was it. I went to work the next day."

Though the fanfare was negligible and life seemed to go on as usual, returning soldiers had forever changed. Some came back with injuries or with inescapable memories of watching friends fall in battle. Others felt empowered.

Lovio says it simply, "We were all kids when we left - went down as a kid. You came back as a man."

In Tucson, one of the returning wounded of Easy Company got national attention in May of 1951 when he was refused admittance to a veterans' hospital. While in Korea, David Arellano's throat had begun to swell, but he said nothing. After his tour of duty, his throat got worse. He was diagnosed with a serious illness, yet the hospital officials refused to admit him for treatment. Korea was called a police action, not a war. This exempted Arellano from veteran status.

In one article of the day, Arellano is quoted, "Korean and Chinese Red troops shot at me. Some of my buddies were killed. If that isn't war, I'd like to know what they call it."

After the story was brought to President Truman's attention, he held a press conference calling for changes and quickly contacted the House and Senate. That night, a unanimous vote was made by Congress and the bill sent to Truman. On May 11, the president signed into effect a law permitting full medical rights to veterans of the undeclared Korea War.

Newfound confidence carried many to better opportunities. Eddie Lovio's first job back from Korea was at the Arizona Ice Company, but he was able to work his way into a machinist job at


THE

eterans Return to THS;
quirements, Enjoy School Spirit

A newspaper clipping shows three veterans of the Korean War who have returned to high school, 1951. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photograph by Edith Sheaffer)

Hughes Aircraft with no experience. Six months later, he joined the Tucson Fire Department where he would retire as fire chief.

Ruben Moreno returned to cabinetmaking but would eventually take a contract for a year of construction work in Saudi Arabia. He built every home he ever lived in.

Others made activism their calling. In 1954, Hector Morales returned home to enroll at the University of Arizona and studied architectural engineering. By the late 1950s, he had become a deputy county assessor, serving until 1966. In December 1965, Morales won election to a Ward 5 seat on the Tucson City Council. In that time, he contributed to the Civil Rights movement by successfully fighting to enact the Omnibus Civil Rights Ordinance that created equal housing and equal opportunity employment in Tucson. Morales also extended Tucson water service to the Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui tribes. He would also help remove sales tax from food and medical prescriptions.

Morales would go on to serve as campaign manager for Morris K. Udall's 1976 bid for the Democratic nomination for U.S. president. Later, Morales worked in the Carter administration as executive assistant for regional operations. He also helped found several organizations to help those who were poor or disadvantaged, and worked with César Chávez and Dolores Huerta as a congressional lobbyist on issues such as pesticides and union organizing.

Days after Morales's passing in March 2010, U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva acknowledged his importance, "What he did was to allow many of us to be who we are now. He was smart, competent, capable and very Latino."

Morales's time as city councilman did seem to be a pivotal point in Tucson politics. Between 1912 and 1965, only three Mexican Americans had served on Tucson's City Council. Since Morales's term, a Mexican American has served

on the council every year.

In 1968, when Morales stepped down, another Easy Company veteran was elected to city council: Rudy Castro for Ward 6. Castro would be elected again in Ward 5 at the end of 1973.

But it was baseball that defined Castro's life. When the Marines learned of his baseball skills, they spared him the trip to Korea and put him on Camp Pendleton's baseball team. After his discharge, Castro got a scholarship at the U of A, playing shortstop for the Arizona Wildcats. Castro went on to a teaching and coaching career at several schools. Finally, he landed at Tucson High School in 1969, where he taught physical education and coached baseball at the school's new baseball diamond. Today, that field is named after Castro. An article in the Arizona Daily Star announcing the field's renaming read, "It was baseball that kept Castro's boys in school and it was Castro who kept them in baseball."

Easy Company veteran Tom Price was another Mexican American who would become prominent in his hometown, serving as Tucson's longtime chief of operations. In the 1970s, Price got together with a few fellow Marines and organized the 20-year reunion for Easy Company. This led to the formation of Tucson Detachment 007 of the Marine Corps League Veterans organization. Together, the men held benefits to raise money for the community and had Christmas parties to collect gifts for the children. One of their great passions was the Devil Pups program. It seems a perfect fit.

The Devil Pups program was started in 1953 when retired Marine Corps Col. Duncan Shaw organized a community benefit project to help in the development of character qualities in adolescent youth. The program sends several teens from across the southwestern United States to Camp Pendleton for two weeks during summer vacation – much like the Easy Company Marines did in the late 1940s. The Tucson Marines involvement with these teens brings Easy Company's own story full circle.

In 1994, when Ruben Moreno began recording the stories of Easy Company, he published them in three volumes in 1994, 1996 and 2000, as booklets to help raise funds for the Devil Pups program.

REMEMBERING THE WAR

It was in filming a history series called *Tucson Remembers* that documentary filmmaker Tom Kleespie realized another story needed to be told.

"After completing three, one-hour programs on World War II, we began to research the Korean War," says Kleespie. "I was astonished with how little, in comparison to the previous wars, written or visual material was available.... Shortly after beginning

the interviews, the importance and magnitude of the Easy Company Marines and other local veterans was quickly apparent."

Kleespie continues, "We felt these stories deserved national attention. We reedited the two local, one-hour "*Tucson Remembers"* into one program, "*Unforgettable: The Korean War,"* that aired nationally on PBS in June of 2010. It aired the week of the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War."

In 2010, Tom Kleespie created the documentary, *Unforgettable: The Korean War*, with several interviews of "Easy" Company Veterans. (Latino Perspectives/ Charles Sanderson)

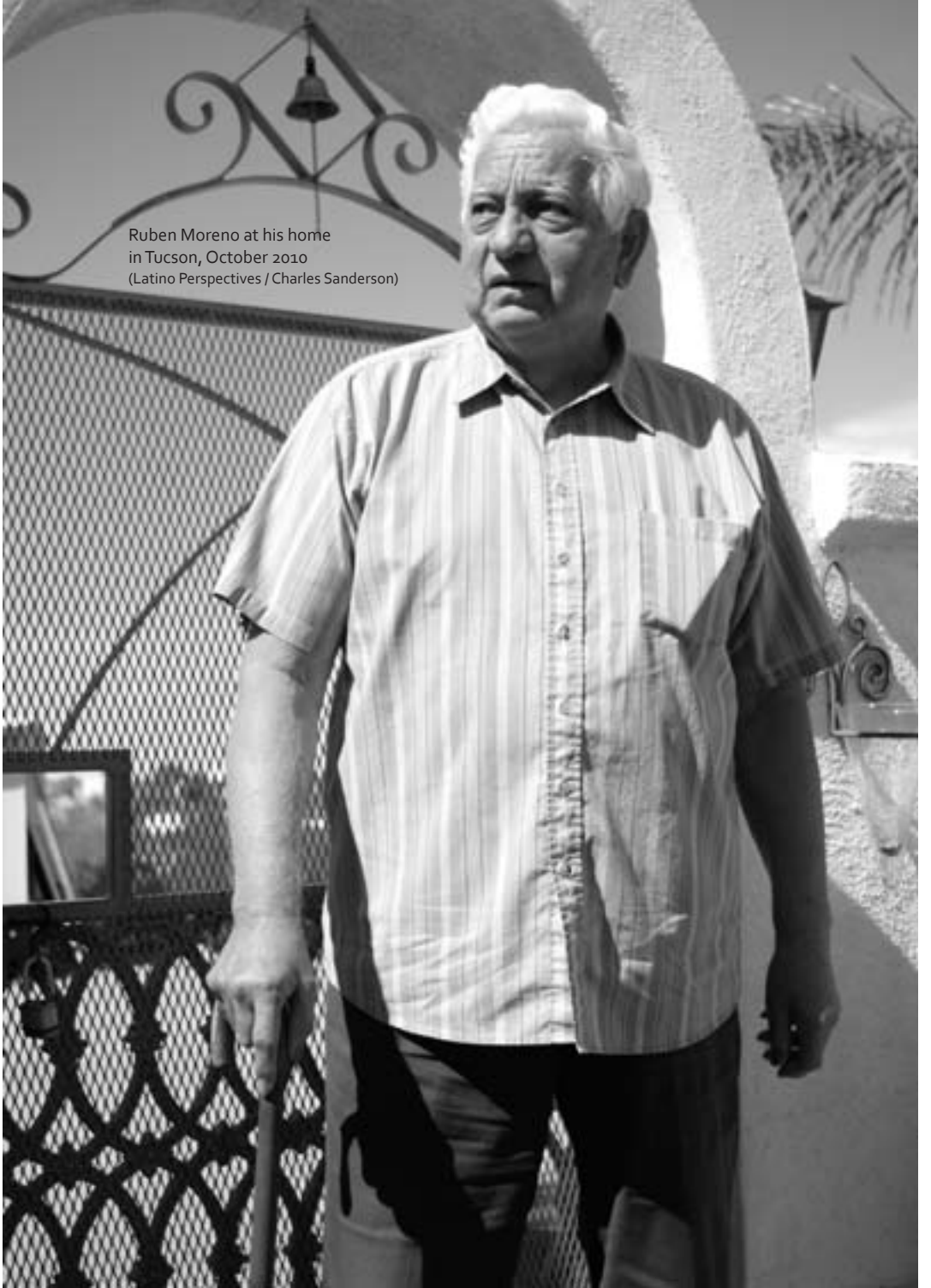
Today, most don't remember that the Korean War never did officially end. The conflict stands as a marker for the beginning of the Cold War that lasted between the United States and the Soviet Union into the 1980s. The war is no longer so forgotten with Tom Kleespie's documentary. But, neither is it the well-known storyline that is World War II, Vietnam or Iraq.

The veterans themselves have had to do much of the work preserving their stories. In 1999, Joe Alvarez, an Army veteran of the Korean War, began the effort to give Tucson a Korean War Memorial in time for its 50th anniversary: a three-sided, eight-foot granite obelisk engraved with the names of Tucson's fallen soldiers in all branches of the military. While searching for funding, Alvarez met a businessman in Tucson's Korean community and found unexpected aide. The man called a meeting with several other Korean business owners. When all funds had been collected, the Korean community had given more than half of the $25,000 needed. The rest came from and through the efforts of Tucson's Edward W. Rhoads chapter of the Korean War Veterans Association.

Five years later, the Marine League Detachment 007 wanted to do something a little more. Ruben Moreno and several others decided to create a tile mural from photos Moreno had collected of the 12 confirmed dead Marines and add it to a wall near the obelisk. (A 13th soldier is likely dead but listed as missing in action.)

Despite the loss of friends and the jarring end to their youth, most of Easy Company's veterans will give the same answer when asked if Korea was worth it: Yes. Some point to an example of proof. "Have you ever seen that night-time satellite photo that NASA has of Korea? South Korea is lit up. Alive. North Korea, nothing."

The Kino Korean War Memorial in South Tucson, erected in 2000.
(Latino Perspectives / Charles Sanderson)



Ruben Moreno at his home
in Tucson, October 2010
(Latino Perspectives / Charles Sanderson)

RUBEN MORENO

As a boy, Ruben Moreno built model airplanes and daydreamed of learning to fly. Maybe he'd join the Air Force someday and fly all over the world. He had no concern for history. He had no idea that there was a country called Korea. He hung out with his friends, chopped wood and went to school.

In his junior year at Tucson High School, Moreno dropped out of school and went into the military. It was the Navy he joined for two years, not the Air Force. Then, when he came home to Tucson, a friend, Hector Hanson, suggested he join the Marine Corps Reserve, since everyone else was.

Ruben remembers, "It was a good place to see the rest of the guys. We had meetings every two weeks. So, after the meetings we'd go have a beer, have a good time. It was just a nice thing to do."

Then North Korea crossed the 38th Parallel. When the Tucson Marine Reserves were called up, Ruben thought nothing would happen. They would just go to San Diego and back up the real Marines. But the U.S. government had bigger plans and little time to act.

With his two year stint in the Navy, the 20-year-old Moreno was considered a trained soldier. He was sent to Korea on the USS Noble with the 1st Marine Division, 2nd Battalion, Dog Company. Moreno was to take part in the landing at Inchon as the war started. The U.S. forces mobilized so quickly that Ruben Moreno had to have a dog tag made for him aboard the ship and they misspelled his name.

After landing, Moreno and thousands of Marines pushed inland, hard. As fellow soldiers dropped around them, the men forced back the North Koreans and made their way to the decimated city of Seoul, where they took back the city in door-to-door combat, which is one of the deadliest forms of battle. The men continued pushing back the North Koreans to the Yalu River bordering with China.

In the evenings, Moreno and his companions would compare notes, "When we'd get together, why we'd start counting heads, you know. Get the names as to who had gotten injured; who was wounded and sent back; who was killed. Just kept up-to-date that way. ... It gave us something to talk about."

Moreno was fortunate not to suffer any serious injury. The one that does still bother him today is when he got "tossed up" by an explosion, dislocating his left shoulder.

"When I got back home I saw the chiropractors, doctors," he says. "They gave me X-rays and my spine was all like..." —

he raises his hand and wiggles it back and forth to trace the damage to his back.

After returning to Inchon and being rerouted around the peninsula to Wonson, the men started battling north to the Yalu River, near the border of Manchurian China.

Moreno recalls the cold weather that got colder as the march wore on, "When the snot freezes on your nose, well, you know it's cold."

With only minor frostbite damage to his fingers, he was lucky. But his squad was replaced over and over. He had started as an ammo carrier and ended up in charge of his machine gun squad. The loss of friends was never easy.

He only mentions one or two deaths, in passing, "One really good friend. His name was Moreno, too – no relation. He was from Nogales. He was the storyteller of the crowd. So, we were really sad to see him go. He had a good death; one shot was all it took."

He jokes that he may have survived the Korean War because he was picked on as a kid for being tall and skinny, "I was notoriously getting into fights. Mainly because I was stretched out and long, you know? The tallest one in the class and they figured 'Well, if I can put him under my belt if I pick a fight and win.' The people I ran into [after the war], they came up to me and shook my hand. They saw the write-ups I got in the paper. They'd say, 'I remember how they always picked on you. They taught you how to fight!'"

Moreno rarely mentions that he earned two of Easy Company's nine Bronze Stars. He is proudest of the one he earned for rescuing a wounded friend under heavy fire after their position was over run, then reorganizing his men and retaking the position. But he's not proud of the deed, so much as the autograph on his commendation. It is signed by Lewis B. Puller, Colonel USMC. The legendary barrel-chested "Chesty" Puller is the most famous "Devil Dog" and holds the admiration of most every soldier to ever be a Marine.

Like many in Easy Company, Ruben Moreno returned to what he was doing when he left; cabinet making. He was offered a job running the cabinet shop for a local construction company. He married and had a family, built his own home and rarely brought up the Korean War. In the 1960s, when his first marriage broke up, Moreno took a year-long contract to do construction work in Saudi Arabia. He returned to life in Tucson and built a new home. Life continued on, but he still hadn't truly come to terms with his experiences in the Korean War. Even after Easy Company member Tom Price started the Marine Corps League in 1970, Ruben rarely was involved.

Then, in the 1990s, Ruben Moreno began to sit down with fellow veterans

to document their stories with the help of Tucsonans Rudy M. Lucero and Annie M. Lopez. These recordings were submitted to the Arizona Historical Society and put into pamphlets as well as made available on the Internet. The first book was published in 1994, the second in 1996 and the last in 2000. In 2004, he found a use for the pictures he had collected of Easy Company's 12 Marines who had died in Korea.

The Korean War memorial had already been constructed, but the Marine Corps League wanted to add its own touch. After a few fundraisers, a new tile mural was unveiled on one wall of the memorial. It showed the faces of those 12 men killed in action and their names.

Ruben humbly states that he started the project after making the suggestion to the historical society where his wife was a docent.

A 2004 tile mural created in 2004 as a tribute to the fallen members of Easy Company, at the Kino Korean War Memorial in South Tucson, 2010. (Latino Perspectives / Charles Sanderson)

He had not seen anybody else make the Korean War a little less forgotten and decided, "Well, I better try it myself. ... I wrote down what I thought should have been written. I just thought it was a good idea to write down what we could remember about the war. I figured we were part of history... that was important to me. Part of history. It's a shame to lose your history. There were a lot of heroics that went on and never got written down."

In a 1999 article for the Arizona Daily Star, Ruben's wife Irma pointed out that the story collection has been a cathartic process for these soldiers. She gave Ruben as an example: "He has come to a peaceful conclusion about his part in killing people because he was very bothered at first. But, now he is at peace with himself."

Ruben Moreno states, "I'm proud of what I did and how I did it over there. All in all, the guys that I knew .... they showed guts out there. They went out there like they were trained. .... I did some growin' up really fast. [It] made me understand that life is not forever. Might as well live while you're alive."

Moreno wrote a poem for the final pamphlet of stories he'd collected in 2000. It follows:

Forever Young

by Ruben Lopez Moreno, January 17, 1998

Looking at the pictures of Tucson's "E" Company Marines
Who gave their lives some forty-eight years ago in the Korean ravines,
We who look and remember them, from back then, have aged.
But forever young they remain.
For them, we can't turn the page.

Forever young
These our comrades-in-arms
Free from further harm

Forever young
These who paid with their lives
Gone from their families and wives
Forever young
In pictures we see their faces, free from worry
But only and forever in our memory

Forever Young
These who came to the end of their story
In God's words - knew a greater glory

Forever Young
We still Here hold in veneration
These twelve young men who paid the price for our nation.

And when we arrive at Heaven's Gate,
Will our comrades recognize us at plus 88
Or will they greet us in a voice serene,
"You kept our memory alive. You're welcome here,
Marine."

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What follows are excerpts from oral histories compiled by Ruben Moreno, Rudy Lucero and Annie M. Lopez. Moreno spearheaded an effort to transcribe the materials and self-publish and finance the oral histories into three volumes with the intention of raising funds for a youth camp at Camp Pendleton.

In 1995, Moreno contacted Micaela Morales and Stuart Glogoff, then with the University of Arizona Library. They created an online collection of the oral histories archived at UA's "*Through Our Parents' Eyes: History & Culture of Southern Arizona"* website, which focuses on Southern Arizona's history and culture.

HAROLD DON

Harold Don joined the Easy Company Marines in 1948 while a junior in Tucson High School. There he met friends that would last through a lifetime: Gilbert Romero, Eddie Lovio, Jimmy Fisher, Albert Felix and Rudy Castro.

In 1950, less than two months after carrying grocery bags at his parents' store, Harold Don landed on the beaches of Inchon, Korea carrying a heavy machine gun. Don watched numerous friends fall and saw a helicopter come down under fire while it carried his wounded friend, Niggie Romero, to safety. He escaped numerous close calls, such as the bullet that tore through the forward stock of his gun a second before he stood there, and watching a friend dropped by sniper fire where Harold Don himself had been standing only seconds earlier.

He returned to the U.S. and was offered an opportunity to learn poultry science out of state. He decided to remain in Tucson to continue his career and marry. His community involvement came when, after several years of taking care of his ill wife, she passed on. A friend suggested community involvement beyond what he already was doing and it grew. His involvement in programs such as Devil Pups youth program have helped to overcome new tragedies, including the loss of his daughter to cancer and his son to a heart attack.

ORAL HISTORY:

My parents were born in Canton, China and came to the United States seeking better employment opportunities. I was born in Casa Grande, Ariz. Soon after that, my parents were operating a grocery store at the comer of Riverside and St. Mary's Road in Tucson. There were four more children added to our family.

I grew up in *Barrio* Hollywood, which was predominantly Mexican. The *barrio* was across the Santa Cruz River, which was then the boundary of the city limits. The unpaved streets and the riverbed were my playgrounds. Across the street on St. Mary's Road, there was a brick yard where clay was excavated for making bricks. The enormous holes would fill with water during the rainy season and became swimming pools for the neighborhood kids. The city dump was located on the city side of the river, which also provided a search-of-adventure playground. Then, the many trees growing along the river bank were the made-to-order Tarzan jungle. Since a great deal of my time was occupied helping with the store, I would build model airplanes during my breaks.

I recall that just about every house in the neighborhood had its own well and outhouse. When El Rio Water Company finally piped water into the *barrio*, the water main came from Speedway and since everyone was growing gardens, by the time the water got to our house, it was just a trickle. The water company charged a flat rate because there were no meters.

I attended Menlo Park Elementary School, Roskruge Junior High and graduated from Tucson High School in 1949. Tommy Price, Rudy Castro and Albert Felix talked me into joining E Company in 1948 and my mother was not too happy with this decision. I attended three summer camps at Camp Pendleton, so when the company was activated I was considered well trained.

Like the rest of us, I expected to be trained in California and then be sent home on leave before going overseas. We didn't realize our government had allowed the Marines to get so undermanned that it required the lst and 2nd Divisions plus the Marine Reserves to bring the Marines to the strength of one full division. It wasn't long before I was on my way to Kobe, Japan, on board the USS Noble with the rest of the 1st Marine Division. By the 15th of September, I was on the 15th wave making the Inchon landing.

Now, I was in combat as a machine

gunner with the first squad of a heavy machine gun section attached to "Able" Company - the same Company "Niggie" Romero, "Pruny" Trujillo, "Mickey" Rios and Eddie Lopez were in. We were two hours onboard the landing craft before landing, then we sat around the beach waiting for orders to move out. Our company was in reserve. Once we moved out, we stuck pretty much to the railroad headed for Seoul. For the next few days, it was a matter of fighting all day and "digging- in" at night. We had already received our first casualty at Inchon, but it wasn't until we hit Yongdungpo that we really lost some men. For a while, we were way ahead and cut off from the rest of the troops. I recall enemy tanks coming right up to our perimeter and not seeing us. When daylight came, we again heard the tanks and braced ourselves - there was a big sigh of relief when we saw the big white stars painted on the sides.

I had to give up my gunner position because my short legs could not bring up the heavy gun fast enough to suit my superiors. The gun went to a "gung-ho" regular who was killed shortly after when he exposed himself by firing when he did not need to. We were across the Han River by this time and "Tuti" Carrazco had just been killed.

Once Seoul was taken, we dug-in

1st Marines aboard the U.S.S. Noble as it departs Kobe Japan, headed for an amphibious assault on the beaches of Inchon, Japan – 100 miles behind enemy lines. *Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios, photographer unknown*

at a grave yard on a hill. From there, we were sent back to Inchon and then onboard a ship for the Wonsan landing. The short trip took longer than expected because Wonsan harbor had to be cleared of mines. We ran short of rations and had to cut back to two meals a day.

From Wonsan, the 1st Battalion was sent south to Kojo where we were attacked by a strong North Korean force. Bobby Fisher's machine gun section took a beating there and "Nacho" Cruz was awarded the Silver Star in this action.

After Kojo, the weather started to turn cold. There was "scuttlebutt" that the 1st Battalion was to be sent north to Yudam-ni to relieve a unit of the 7th Marines, but the Chinese made a massive attack all along the Marine perimeter and all plans had to be revised.

When the First Marine Division was ordered to "attack to the rear," my battalion was assigned Hill 1081 (the high ground on the road down from Koto-ri). I stayed behind with my machine gun section and later volunteered to re-supply the attacking unit. This was a three-hour ordeal up a mountain through no-man's land. For this, I was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal with the combat "V" for valor.

When the Marines were out of the Chinese trap, I remember seeing Henry "Blackbucket" Valdenegro with a wounded tag tied to his jacket. Henry was all smiles when I asked where he had been hit.

"They say I'm cuckoo," he said, "I'm going back to Japan!"

Henry had brought his cousin "Niggie" down from the hill where he had found him almost frozen to death.

After a short rest in Massan, where the Marines were brought back up to strength with stateside replacements, we attacked north, up the center of Korea, on Operation Killer. Armando Fontes was shot in the leg for the second time in this action and I remember him smiling through the pain, saying, "This makes two Purple Hearts. I'm going home."

I envied him."Why couldn't I get out of here with a million dollar wound?" was the thought that crossed most of our minds.

Right after World War II, belonged to an organization known as The Sino-American Club, where I met my wife-to-be, Jean. She had an aunt who was a nun and who promised to pray for me while I was in the service. I had so many close calls I believe she must have sent a guardian angel to watch over me. At Seoul, my machine gun received two slugs through the tripod. Later, a bullet buried itself in the mud between me and the guy in front of me. At the Hwachon Reservoir, my binocular case was torn to pieces by shrapnel. I wasn't with my squad when

a short round exploded among them. In Operation Killer, my M-1 was rendered useless when it stopped a bullet. When a motor patrol was sent out, I was sent to another squad to beef up the line and there was an explosion in my squad area that killed one and wounded the rest. There IS a God!

I started getting shaky when I found out I'd be going home. Some friends and I were swimming at the Hwachon Reservoir when one of our Corsairs dropped a napalm bomb in the water.

Harold Don at a veterans function, 2008. (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)

It didn't explode, but soon all the water was fouled. I was sent home in August of 1951 on the USS Collins. It was a glorious 10-day trip. We were treated like kings - steak and a bath every day!

When we docked at Treasure Island I was asked my duty station preference. First, I asked for San Diego; second, Camp Pendleton; third, Seattle — all on the West Coast. I was sent to Camp Lejeune on the East Coast. I shared expenses with Salomon Contreras, Earl Collins and Otis Baker, who bought a car. We drove to the East Coast. I was mustered out three months later, in January of 1952.

I came home on my first bus ride by a southern route. The sign on the bus read "Whites in front, Blacks in the back," so I sat in the middle. At the bus depots there were rest rooms for blacks and rest rooms for whites. Not wanting to offend anyone, I floated my kidneys all the way to Texas.

Back home I returned to school under the GI Bill, got married and had one small job after another until I landed a job with the state, where I worked for 2 1/2 years and then got a job with the Agricultural Research USDA, from which I retired 24 1/2 years later.

The closest I came to being killed was on the soccer field in school when Earl "Tiny" Collins kicked me instead of the ball and introduced me to the study of Astrology.

Several soldiers of Tucson wait in Kobe Japan, Sept. 1950.
(Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

MARTIRIANO F. RAMIREZ

Marty Ramirez remembers arriving at Camp Pendleton and seeing the Marines stationed there go through a bit of culture shock with so many Mexican American soldiers on base. As one of the Easy Company Marines Reserves who had been through two summer camps, he would join in the landing at Inchon with Mickey Rios and a few other boys from Tucson, before several units were separated.

He would enjoy 30 days of reprieve after recovering from wounds to his stomach caused by a nearby bomb explosion. He would receive the Purple Heart for his injuries 44 years after, with the help of his companions who wrote letters on his behalf.

Returning to the U.S., Marty first "just wondered what girl I was gonna take to the dance on Friday." But, taking a girl out meant he needed to make money.

Ramirez took a job at Marana Air Force Base as a painter and sheetmetal worker with Lockheed Aircraft. After five years, he transferred to Fort Huachuca as a supervisor. After 10 years, he took a job working with the Los Arcos Mining Company for the next two decades before retiring in 1992.

ORAL HISTORY

I was born the 22nd of August, 1929, in Tucson, Ariz. My neighborhood was Sunset Villa, around 36th Street and Ninth Avenue.

As a kid, I had the regular household chores like chopping wood for the stove and bringing in water, since we didn't have indoor plumbing. You know, it's hard for kids to understand that. They are so used to modern conveniences. Kids nowadays have to be involved in all kinds of sports and body-building programs. Our body building came from our chores. I had to have a supply of wood by the stove and the household water in buckets before I was given permission to go anywhere.

Another thing I remember is the respect you were taught for anyone older than you were. It was like a responsibility. You had to be available to run errands or help anyone who needed help. Nowadays, you tell a kid to do something for you and he wants to know how much you're going to pay him.

My father, Adolfo Ramirez, was born here in Los Reales by the Santa

Cruz River, north of the San Xavier Mission. My father worked quite a bit for the state making roads and paths in the Catalina Mountains. He also operated farm equipment like a combine and contracted with farmers to pick their crops. He was only 57 years old when he died in 1952, on the 16th of September, like a patriotic Mexican. I had just gotten married. I was named Martiriano after one of his brothers. That name goes back to my great-grandfather. I'm the fourth one down the line and I named one of my boys Martiriano, too.

My mother was also Tucson born. She was married at the Santa Cruz Church. She had two boys and three girls. She was born in 1890 and died in 1984. Her maiden name was Mercedes Federico.

I started school at Mission View, just across the street from where we lived. I quit school in the eighth grade at Wakefield Junior High to go to work when my father got sick. I went to work for Standard Oil Company, wrestling oil drums and tidying the place up. It wasn't big money but it helped until my father could get back on his feet. I never did go back to school.

I was 18 when I joined Easy Company of the Marine Reserves in 1948. I attended three summer camps. When we were activated, I wound up in Able Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. "Bert" Rincon, Eddie Lopez, Eddie Rios, "Pruney" Trujillo, Oscar Rendon and Robert Lopez were also in my outfit.

After they organized us in Camp Pendleton, we sailed out of San Diego for Kobe, Japan. From Japan, we sailed for Korea, where we landed at Inchon.

Our first real battle came about at Yongdungpo. We had dug in on a dike by the Hun River. We had foxholes on either side of the dike, facing the town and facing the river. It was still dark when we were attacked by the North Koreans, assisted by three tanks. We had one tank stop right in front of us. I had my BAR dug in next to a light machine gun. The lieutenant told us not to fire or expose ourselves until we knew exactly what was going on, but the machine gunner next to me got itchy when he saw this Korean on top of the tank and he opened up. The tank fired pointblank at the machine gunner, then, everyone cut loose. Our bazooka man knocked out the lead tank and the one behind it started to leave when it was also disabled. We were hit by two waves of North Koreans.

We had captured a North Korean officer earlier and he somehow got loose and ran toward his comrades, yelling not to attack, that we were too strong for them. Our interpreter told us this. We were only a platoon. When the attack was over, they had left 275 dead and a bunch of weapons behind. We lost one machine gunner.

During a lull in the fight, our captain sent Mickey Rios to see what the North Koreans were up to behind some buildings. He went down there and saw an officer shouting orders. So Mickey drew a bead on him and got him. When Mickey got back, the captain asked what that jabbering was about. Mickey replied, "Some officer just talked himself to death."

Emilio Ramirez was hit before we got to the dike. He crawled under a house and bled to death. We found him the next day.

We dug in on some hills and as we were getting ready to head back to Inchon, a .50 caliber machine gun cut loose on us. Tommy, our corpsman, who was supposed to leave earlier but he preferred to stay with our company, was killed. So was Reilly, Proctor and a few others.

From Inchon, we boarded ship and made the Wonsan Landing. Then, we headed south to Kojo. This was where we lost a lot more men. We made the big mistake of relaxing. The R.O.K.s had already been through the area, so we thought we had it easy. Captain Barrows would not let us ease up. He made us dig foxholes and set up a perimeter. All the time, we were thinking, "What for? There's no one here!" Boy, were we mistaken!

They hit us that night. They caught the guys below us flat-footed. Some were bayoneted in their sleeping bags. They almost wiped out the CR (command ranks). A sergeant, a lieutenant and Horn were killed there. Pfc. Lohra was wounded on the temple and I had shrapnel all down my side. When daylight came, we walked down to the beach where we were supposed to be picked up. As I walked, I made a squishing sound from the blood

Robert H. Barrow (1922-2008), nicknamed "Skipper" by his men, commanded Company A of the 1st Battalion, Ist Marines. He led several Tucson boys through the Inchon-Seoul campaign and in the Chosin Reservoir. He would go on to become the 27th Commandant of the United States Marine Corps (USMC) from 1979 to 1983. (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)

collecting in my shoe. Lohra had had his head bandaged and was doing all right until they laid him down on the stretcher. His wound hemorrhaged and he died right there.

I did my recuperating on board the hospital ship in October and November. On the 26th or 27th, they released me and told me I could go back to my outfit. When I got to Hamhung, I presented myself to an officer and he sent me to Item Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. I got to Hamhung in time for Thanksgiving dinner. They were serving it in an old bombed-out building. By the time I sat down to eat it, it was frozen over.

When I got to Hagaru-ri, I was sent to this big hill by the air strip. It was very steep and they had hung a rope on it to help yourself up. We had two machine guns up there, overlooking a valley toward Koto-ri. When the Chinese hit us, they just kept coming. We couldn't kill them fast enough. Finally, this major told us to get the hell out of there.

As we ran by the air strip, an officer asked this guy and me what outfit we were with. When we told him, he says, "There's room for two more in that C-45.

In a photo released by the U.S. Marine Corps, a column of the U.S. 1st Marine Division moves through Chinese lines during their breakout from the Chosin Reservoir, December 1950. (Marine Corps archive / Corporal Peter McDonald, USMC)

Get on it!" So we did and wound up in the naval hospital in Yokohama. It wasn't until we were boarding the C-45 that I realized the other guy was Tony Leon, another Tucsonan.

From Yokohama, I was sent to Camp Otsu. I was there for seven or eight months. I ran into "Black Bucket" and Anthony Pitts there. Then, one day, the word came that they wanted combat-experienced drill instructors in San Diego. So 15 of us applied. Next day at formation, I was the first one called. Six of us got to go.

We arrived in San Francisco on the fifth of March. We got the royal treatment. The fifth through the 11th was declared Marine Week. We were given a card which entitled us to a free drink or a meal anywhere we went in San Francisco. The problem was that I wasn't old enough to drink. I got to go home on a 30-day leave.

Back in San Diego, I was assigned as the junior DI [drill instructor] under Sgt. Kilpatrick, training Platoon number 25. Of course, the junior DI got to do all the work. One day, I was taking the platoon to a movie when we met another one coming toward us. I heard someone holler my name. I stopped my platoon and so did the other DI.

He pulled the culprit out of ranks and proceeded to eat him up good, "Don't you know you're not supposed to talk in ranks, much less shout?"

It was "Buntie" Gauna from Tucson's Easy Company. I asked his DI if I could talk to him. I took him aside and stood him at attention while I talked to him. We made arrangements to see each other later. We had a good visit in my squad bay.

Our next platoon was number 27. We whipped this one into the Honor Platoon but I had had enough of "DIing." The getting up at 3:30 in the morning and checking the recruits every minute of the day, and even getting up in the middle of the night to do so, was getting old. Then, too, I couldn't be chicken - - - - to the "boots" like the rest of the DIs.

So, I talked to the adjutant for another assignment. He was most understanding. He sent me to ID Section and made me a corporal, to boot. It was like dying and going to heaven. I had my own office, my own bedroom and recruits to keep it clean for me. I also had [someone] to do my paperwork. It was a racket! I would go to Tucson just about every weekend. I had the job for almost a year until my CO came and offered me sergeant stripes. I asked, "What do I have to do?"

"Reenlist," he said. "You are due for release from active duty next month."

Can you imagine! I passed all that up to go home and get married. I married Alice Coronado on the 19th of April, 1952 and started my family of two boys and one girl.

In 1948, Gilbert "Niggie" Romero was a 17-year-old high school student working at a local printing company.

Gilbert "Niggie" Romero, circa 1952
(Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)

GILBERT VASQUEZ ROMERO

On the suggestion of a cousin, Niggie decided to join the Marine Corps Reserves with all his friends.

In battle, Niggie successfully captured a North Korean soldier to be interrogated and was at the infamous Battle of Chosin Reservoir. Then, after catching shrapnel on March 22, 1951, Niggie was wounded severely on a hilltop during the Battle of Horseshoe Ridge on April 24, 1951, north of Chuncheon.

Despite being hit by five bullets that day, Niggie Romero would return to Tucson alive. He spent 10 months at Balboa Hospital in San Diego for surgery and recovery. He returned home to work at a printing company where he finally retired in 1991. In 1953, he married his wife, Mary, and started a family. After 60 years and 28 corrective surgeries for war-related injuries, his spirit and smile are still strong.

He received two Purple Hearts and a Silver Star for bravery.

I grew up around Pascua Village on the northside, behind the Blue Moon. Our neighborhood was mostly family.

ORAL HISTORY

There were many vacant lots and plenty of room to play. We had a baseball diamond and a football field. The Peraltas - Jimmy and Ramon - used to play golf around there.

My father was a subcontractor in the building trades and, as I grew up, I helped him. I also had responsibilities such as chopping wood, carrying water, cleaning the yard, and helping my grandmother and grandfather. For a while, we had well water but then the city water came in and my dad installed it.

For fun. we used to play hide-and-seek, ron-chiflon (run-sheep-run) and kick-the-can. We also played marbles and tops and made kites. We got bamboo from Peterson's Dairy and used "engrudo" (paste made from water and flour) to glue the paper.

I attended Davis Elementary, then Roosevelt, then back to Davis, then Roskruge and then Tucson High and graduated in 1948.

My cousin, Henry Valdenegro, was in the Navy, then the Army, and also did a hitch in the Air Force. When he was discharged, he asked if I wanted to join the Marine Reserves with him and that's how I got in. After the Korean

War, Henry stayed in the Marines for 35 years before retiring.

When the Korean War broke out, I was working with Pima Printing on Scott and Gilbert Quintanilla, a former Marine, was my foreman. I was in the reserves and when we were activated, I was not prepared. We were taken by train to Camp Pendleton and I thought we were just going to summer camp for more training, but when they said "Whoever has had two summer camps, step forward," I knew it was serious. The next thing we knew, we were training day and night and then they took us on buses to San Diego and aboard the USS Noble.

We landed at Inchon on Sept. 15, 1950. I was with Able Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. Most of the Tucson guys wound up in Able, Baker and Charlie companies but a few went to the 2nd Battalion. I went in with the 15th wave, but we landed on the wrong beach. We were lucky. We landed on Red Beach when we were supposed to have landed on Blue Beach. We got a couple of rounds coming out of Inchon and then passed through a little village called Sosa before you get to Yongdungpo, and that's where we had our first big battle. We were just setting up when the T-34 tanks hit us. From there, we crossed the Han River to Seoul where we went house-to-house through the city. When we secured Seoul, we went back to Inchon. At that time, I was a rifleman.

Posing with a captured North Korean Flag, left to right, kneeling are Gilbert Romero, Henry Valdenegro, (first name unknown) Roberts, Eddie "Mickey" Rios and Eddie S. Rillos. Standing men's names are unknown. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

I don't remember much about taking Seoul. I didn't have time to think; we were fighting and I saw friends get wounded. One of our biggest losses was when Jesus Carrasco got killed. Harold Don was one of the stretcher bearers and he was the one who notified us that Carrasco had been killed.

In our outfit, it was Able Company that raised the American Flag in Seoul. That might have been where Colonel Puller was ordered to show up for the rededication, to turn the city over to South Korea. They wouldn't let him in because he wasn't dressed properly. He was in fatigues and he let them know that this was the uniform he was wearing and he wasn't about to go back to the ship and change. He was finally let through. I don't remember that ceremony.

Colonel Puller was quite a hero to all Marines. I understand that at boot camp every night before they turned out the lights they'd say "Good night, Chesty, Wherever you are." In fact, my brother has a picture of himself with Chesty Puller taken at one of the Marine balls.

After Seoul, we went back to Inchon where we were on the ship for two weeks. When they decided to land us, we were at Wonsan and went on to Kojo where Baker Company was hit real bad. Some of the guys hit were Bobby Fisher, Bobby Quiroz, Richard Noriega, Shorty Epson, Gilbert Orduno and Freddie Grijalva. We were up on a hill, where we had a couple of casualties in our company. The Corsairs were bombing the village beneath the hill and some of the shrapnel hit our personnel.

Kojo had a beautiful beach, an ideal place for R&R. The water was so clear you could see the fish swimming around.

I understand that the next day the village was shelled. Something like a battalion of North Koreans came out of there and they were strafed and shelled. In the morning we could see the strafing of the rice fields and we could see them running. At the time, they said they were guerrillas, but when guerrillas attack, they hit and run, and these troops went full force.

We went from Kojo to Hamhung. The Army had a railhead at Chinghungni which was our base of operations. We started going north and, through one of our reconnaissance patrols, we learned we were fighting Chinese. We killed some Chinese and there was a woman among them. Of course, the general didn't believe the Chinese were in on it yet. They still thought we were fighting North Koreans. The only way we could distinguish the Chinese from the North Koreans was that the Chinese were wearing white quilted uniforms.

I remember a hairpin turn on the road coming down from Kotori. Our outfit was called on to take Hill 1081 and we lost quite a few people there. That's where I hurt my back. A Chinese threw

a grenade. I had my pack with me and I fell back. I don't know if I hit a stump or what, but I had to be carried down on a stretcher. I landed on a hospital ship for about a week and then went down to Masan, where I rejoined my company and we started getting replacements. That's where we spent Christmas and New Years. I think it was kind of lonely. I was used to spending Christmas with family, but a lot of Tucson guys were there - familiar faces like Raul Reyes, Hector Gracia, Oscar Nunez, Albert Corral, Manny Miranda and others. After that, I was involved in Operation Killer and that's where I got wounded.

The first time I was wounded was March 22, 1951. I was hit in the legs by shrapnel but all they did was send me back to the field hospital. It took three days to get there and three days to get back. That's what I got for not being in the Army. They'd have sent me to Japan.

The second time I got hit was in Yodong in April. This time through my chin and chest shattering my chin, part of my jaw and upper chest. They thought I had been hit through the lungs. The bullet went down my chest hit my hipbone, bounced back and came out through my armpit. I didn't know about my injuries until years later, when I was out of the Marine Corps. Harold Don related that I was strapped to a stretcher and placed in a chopper to take me to the field hospital. The chopper got hit and the other Marine in the chopper with me was killed. They fought their way out and put me on a truck then I got hit on the legs again while in the truck. I didn't know about all this until I woke up in Yokuska, Japan.

Jimmy Fisher was my corpsman. I was told they red-tagged me, said I wouldn't live and put me outside. I had lost a lot of blood. Jimmy gave an Escapulario (Scapular religious symbol), which was the only thing I brought back from Korea. They had to pry my hand open to see what I holding.

Once back in Japan, it took me two weeks to wake up and I didn't know where I was. I saw all the nurses in white uniforms and thought I was in heaven. I couldn't speak; my jaw was wired up; my arm was taped to my chest; and I drank through my throat so I wouldn't choke. I lost a lot of muscle - about 30 percent on my upper chest. My legs had been hit but I had no broken bones, just flesh wounds.

When I came in from Japan, we landed first in Hawaii, then at Travis and then down to Balboa. Albert Corral and Henry Trujillo were on the same plane. Henry was hit on the same day and at the same time I was. While in the air, we hit a pocket, which caused me to start hemorrhaging and I was rushed to emergency again.

In 1981, I had implants in my jaw but they did more damage than good

and, in 1987, they were taken out. In 1989, more surgery. I lost all my lower teeth and some upper teeth, my jaw got fused and it injured the nerves, and I have problems with my eyes. They want to do more surgery but it is not 100 percent guaranteed.

When I got back to Tucson, I went to work for Clark Marking Devices and worked 38 years for the same under different bosses. When the company went under, I applied for early retirement. Jesus Rico was with Social Security then and he suggested that I put in for disability and, six months, later I got it.

I have been retired since 1991. I work around the house and we go out of town and visit places like Prescott, Chino Valley, Cottonwood and Clarkdale. My daughter lives in El Cajon, Calif., but two of the kids are in town. Gilbert Jr. is a tennis instructor and has his own business.

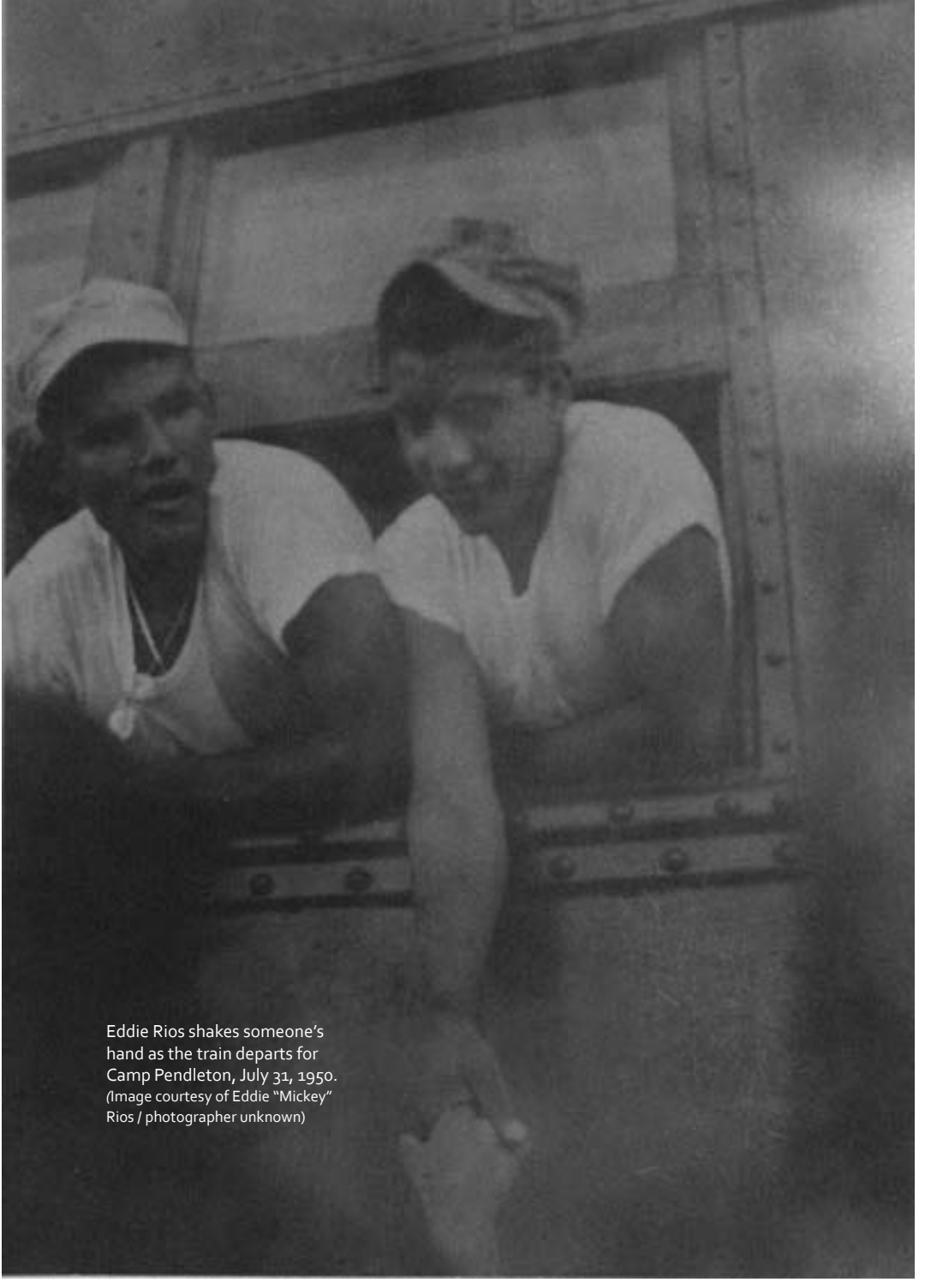
I help out at the club (Marine Corps League), have been in the Color Guard since 1972, and my wife, Mary, does all the decorations at the club and also helps with the food.

My nickname "Niggie" came about around the year 1935. An irrigation ditch near Anita Street, across the tracks, was where we kids would go skinny dipping in the summer and we would spend hours in the sun and get quite dark. A "colored" family moved in

Gilbert Romero convalescing in a San Diego hospital circa 1951. (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)

across the street from the Majutas and one of the boys, John, was swimming with Jimmy Rivera and I when John's sister came by looking for him. John didn't want to be found so he hid behind some bushes and Jimmy told his sister that John wasn't there but a niggie was - meaning me. The name stayed with me all this time and all my friends call me Niggie. In fact, many people don't know my real name is Gilbert, they know me only as Niggie.

Abner Reese, a Marine and bartender at the club, works at the Veterans Hospital. He is black. One day, when I went to have my jaw X-rayed they called down to the X-ray room and asked for the file for Gilbert Romero. Over the intercom, Abner hollered, "Is that you, Niggie?"



Eddie Rios shakes someone's hand as the train departs for Camp Pendleton, July 31, 1950. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

EDDIE "MICKEY" RIOS

Eddie Rios was one of many kids at Tucson High School that joined the Marines Corps Reserves in 1948. He was enticed by the prospect of getting a fancy new pair of shoes, pants and a new khaki shirt printed with U.S. Marine Corps. He could not have expected he would be sent to fight in a country he had never even heard of.

He survived a grenade blast that sent shrapnel into his knees but he kept going after a quick bandaging by the nearest corpsman. He and many of the Easy Company Marines fought in the most heroic and most tragic battle of the Korean War: the Battle of Chosin Reservoir. Here, the Chinese joined the war and surrounded U.S. troops, outnumbering them 10 to one. Finally, Rios was sent home.

Like many returning from Korea, went back to high school for his senior year. But life had changed for him.

He says, "I went back to finish my high school. The teachers let me go, because I was now a veteran. They didn't really bug me at all. They passed me. I could kick myself now."

After high school, Rios entered the workforce. He retired after 33 years with the U.S. Postal Service and still lives in Tucson.

ORAL HISTORY

I was raised with my brothers and sisters at 426 E. 18th St. in Tucson. Our dad left home when we were young, but we all had jobs and pitched in and bought the house.

I went to Safford Elementary where I made the football team (Safford Huskies) and the baseball team. I did go to 1-C but don't remember who my teacher was. At that time, my English was fair but, later on, we were scolded and spanked for speaking Spanish. Old man Dietz - the official "executioner" - would tell us to bend over and touch your toes. I grew up and went to school with Hector "Tripas" Garcia; Eddie "Salado" Rillos; Joe, Manny, Ernest, and Irene Gallardo; Gracie, Ida and Tiny Pellon; Joe Quinlin; the Padias, Munguias and Cooneys. For 25 cents, I could go to the movies, have popcorn and have a nickel left over.

I was the youngest in the family and, when Pearl Harbor was attacked, I was selling newspapers. I sold the "Extra." When I was in high school, I

In Masan, Korea: Left to right, are Eddie "Mickey" Rios, Miguel Romero, Henry Trujillo, Bert Rincon, Gilbert Romero, Jan. 8, 1951 (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)

played football with Jesse Ybarra and Bennie Rincon but I liked to horse around and they kicked me off the team.

I was 17, when I went to join the reserves and Ernie "Banti" Gauna went with me. We got green tee shirts and shoes! We had our physicals and l was accepted. Then, Gabriel Campos, Gabriel Bustamante and I wanted to join the real Marines in Los Angeles. We hopped a train to LA where they took the other guys but told me to get back to Tucson where the Reserves were being activated.

The 1st Regiment, of which I was a part, left San Diego on the USS Noble. They landed us on the wrong beach so we had to get back on the landing craft (LCVP). I was the radioman and runner and carried a small radio over the seawall. I had to contact Baker Company but couldn't reach them by radio. So I ran my butt off to get to them. There was smoke and fire and some dead North Koreans. It was already getting dark when we landed and dug in. Some of the guys in Able Company were James Wood, Oscar Salcido, Bert Rincon, Ray Rios, Harold Don, David Arellano, Henry Trujillo, Henry Valdenegro, Eddie Rillos, Marty Ramirez and Emilio Ramirez.

The next day we headed for Yondungpo and dug in by the side of the Han River. We were surrounded by a couple of tanks and since we didn't have any rockets or anything everybody stayed still. The tanks went back and forth and then went farther south where they were knocked out by another company that had bazookas. We opened fire on the North Koreans as they were trying to cross the river. That was the first time I shot someone. We were just Able Company, the 5th Marines were to the left of us.

Another time, we were attacking a hill where the Chinese had us pinned down. We were on the right flank, the middle portion was open, and the rest of the guys were on the left flank. I had my BAR (Browning automatic rifle) and so did Henry. Henry tried to get his grenade out but couldn't pull the pin. At that time, a grenade thrown by the Chinese exploded right in front of us and we fell back with the concussion. We got up and started firing at the Chinese at the top of the hill and I got my grenade and threw it. Henry got hit in the butt and I got hit in the leg. No one recommended us for anything.

We were up on a hill near Kojo — I remember there was a railroad — when we were hit real bad. It had turned dark at about eight and about 10 or 11 they came up the hill where we were sleeping and sneaked up on us. They came so close we could see their heads. We were fighting all night long. One of the guys next to me got hit on the helmet and it ricocheted and then hit him in the shoulder. He was lucky! Baker Company was also hit real bad and lost quite a few people. Bobby Fisher and Robert Quiroz were in Baker Company, which was also caught asleep. They bypassed us and went ahead. A couple of their squads were lost.

When we went up north, the worst night we had was when we were on Hill 1081. It was snowing and we took the hill late at night. We threw out the

Tom Price in the 1970s
(Image courtesy of Marine Corps League Detachment 007, Tucson / photographer unknown)

dead Chinese who were in the foxholes and dug in. In the early morning, we suddenly heard an airplane coming, a Navy Hellcat. Our air panels and flags were set but the airplane strafed us. He made one pass and took off. An Air Strike Observer took the number on the plane, however, nothing came of this.

I saw Tom Price only once, on one of the hills, when we had just secured Seoul. I saw Niggie then - he was picked up by a helicopter. The enemy downed the chopper and he was put on a truck which was ambushed. Niggie got shot in the legs. Niggie was in the 2nd Squad and he and Henry got hit the same day.

We all came back to Pusan and then southwest to Masan. When we were at Hamhung they got one or two squads from Able Company to give security to one of the ships. We were tired and filthy dirty. The captain said, "We got you guys here for security. Take a bath for as long as you want. I'll call the mess hall. You can have whatever you want - milk, orange juice, beer, whiskey."

Eddie "Mickey" Rios (left) and Bert Rincon tend to more peaceful tasks in Korea, circa November 1950. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

Then they gave us bunks and we slept all night. It felt like we were in heaven. The next day they took us off the ship.

After Masan, we started all over again. I ask myself at Hamhung, when we were all retreating - all the Canadians, British, Army and Marines - why did we have to leave all the space there? Lose all that ground? We had all our carriers and destroyers by the sea. Why couldn't we have set up when we were there? Why did we fall back and come back again? We were tired, but we had all our battleships there and the enemy was tired, too. All of our troops went back and we lost all that ground!

A group of Marines from Tucson sing songs in Korea to pass time. (Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / photographer unknown)

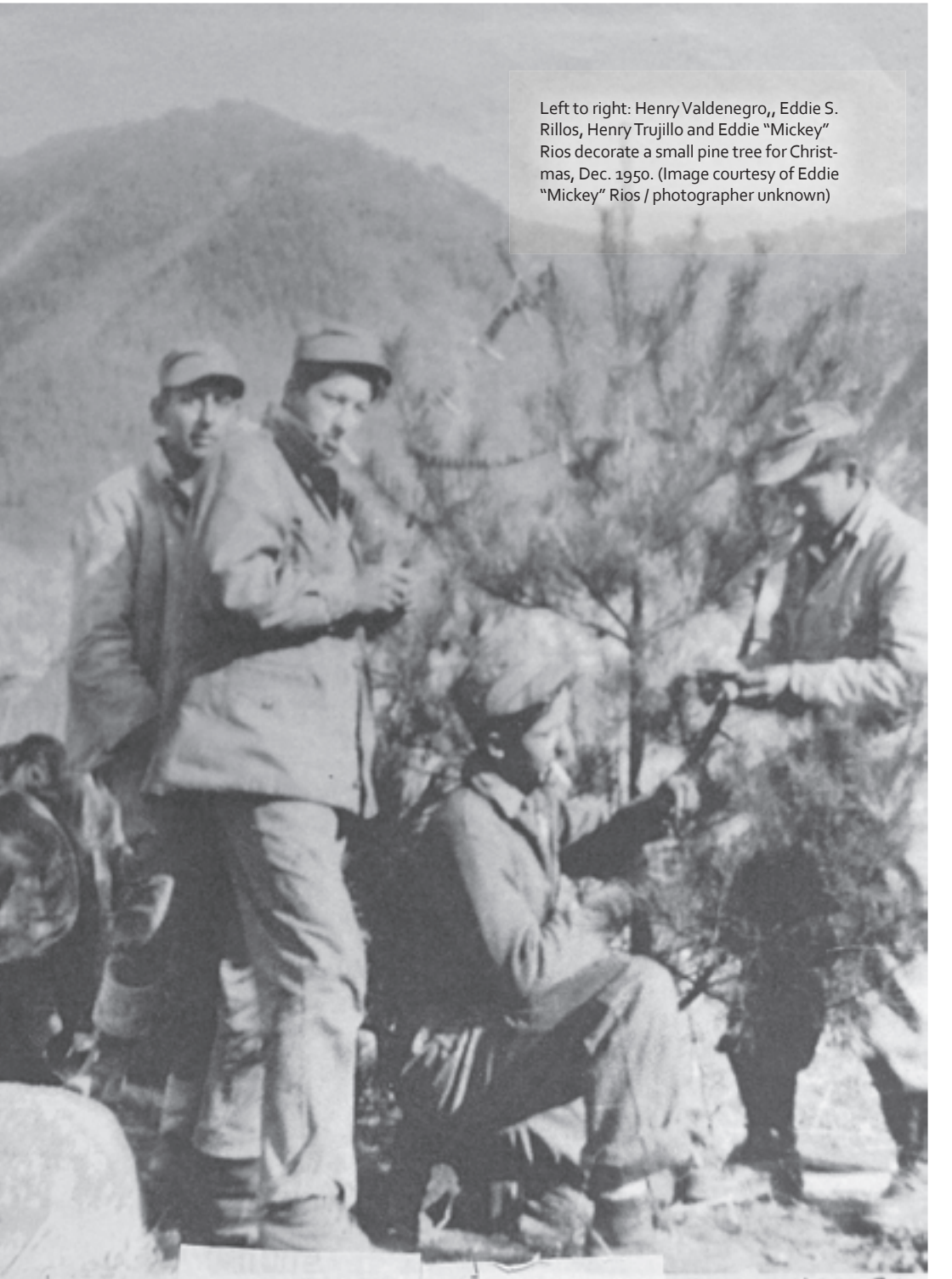
You ask about the Army? The 7th Division and some of the South Koreans were poorly trained. We were always going over to help them and they would "shag ass" (retreat).

During Operation Killer, about April of 1951, we were someplace up in the hills again when I was contacted to see if I wanted to go home now or in the morning. I said, "Hell, no. If we get in a "fire fight," I might lose my ass out here so I'll walk back now. I'll take my chances walking back at night."

So I did. I walked back all night to where some of the guys were set up in tents. The first tent I went into I saw Vincent Suarez, who was in transportation, and he fed me some chow, gave me something to drink and told me to hit the sack.

Guitars. When we weren't in combat on Christmas, I don't know where they got the guitars, but we all got together. The guys got plastered and we would sing. It was all a good and bad experience and I grew up real quick in one year.

I came back and went to high school. It was a little strange. I was older. That's where I met Frances. I went for three semesters and then went to the U of A for a semester, but I just couldn't do it. I needed a lot help. I was still working for the newspaper



Left to right: Henry Valdenegro,, Eddie S. Rillos, Henry Trujillo and Eddie "Mickey" Rios decorate a small pine tree for Christmas, Dec. 1950. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

EDUARDO V. LOVIO

Eddie would arrive on Korean soil in March of 1951. He would be wounded in action on October of that year.

Lovio stepped off the boat in San Diego, after his tour of duty and partied with friends. But the call to return home for a hot meal was too strong to travel with a friend to New Orleans for Mardi Gras.

Lovio returned home to a community that hardly noticed he'd been gone. His first job back from Korea was at the Arizona Ice Company. Then, he found the confidence to lie his way into a machinist job at Hughes Aircraft for six months before joining the Tucson Fire Department where he would retire as a fire chief. He returned the Hughes to work a few more years and helped with the purchasing of a new building for the Marine Corps League 007.

ORAL HISTORY

company, but later I saw an ad for the post office and took the test and passed. I grew up in Barrio San Antonio across the tracks from Millville in Tucson and also in the National City area, in what is now South Tucson, around 33rd Street and Third Avenue.

I attended Miles Elementary School and then Mansfeld Junior High, which was mostly Anglo. I was a very small minority there. I don't think there was but one other Chicano in my class. I was there about a year before we moved to 33rd Street. Then I attended Wakefield Junior High. Talk about culture shock! It was predominantly Chicano. Although it was mostly a rough crowd from Barrio Libre, I didn't have too much trouble there. Quite a few E Company Marines came out of there like Jesse Ybarra, Joe Romero, Gasper Eldridge and Arnulfo Mares. They were all my *camada* [age group]. For that matter, I got along well, even at Mansfeld. I did well in school, grade-wise, and excelled in sports. So, I can't say I was discriminated against. Larry Esquivel and Gene Rodriguez were also Marines that came out of Mansfeld.

Shortly after we moved to 33rd Street, I got a summer job working at the first supermarket in Tucson, Soleng Market. I got a heck of a deal. I worked nine to nine, a 12-hour day, six-days-a-week, for $24. It wasn't too much money but I got to take a lot of slightly-aged produce home. During

school days, I still worked there part time until I was 15.

Then, I went to work for the ice company delivering ice. I'm probably one of the last persons that used to deliver ice to the houses. Few people could afford refrigerators. I also worked at the ice plant on 31st Street and Sixth Avenue. My father worked there, too, as a refrigeration mechanic. He was good at his trade. Sometimes they would send him to Sonora, Mexico, to trouble shoot their operations over there. After Wakefield, I attended Tucson High. I played varsity baseball the first year, but I decided to drop out after that because I needed to earn money to support myself and help the family.

I flunked my senior year for lack of half-a-credit. I would attend school Mondays and Fridays and I'd work the days in between. Still I was passing my tests and getting good grades. This one teacher couldn't stand that. She told me that if I didn't show up on Senior Ditch Day, she would flunk me. I said, "You can't do that! I'm getting passing grades." Well, I didn't and she did. So, I had to go back to school after Korea for my diploma. Teachers could be very unforgiving in those days.


With the Armed Services

RICARDO V. LOYO

News clipping circa 1950. *(Image courtesy of Gilbert Romero / source unknown)*

I was 17 when E Company was activated. You know, that was young for a Hispanic senior in high school. Even at Wakefield Junior High, I can remember guys being drafted out of there. Anyway, I had attended my first summer camp when we boarded the train to take us from Tucson to Camp Pendleton.

At Pendleton, I was sent to the Sixteenth Area to work at the motor pool. We were taking trucks, tanks and other equipment out of moth bars, changing the oil and greasing them. Oriol Armenta, Manny Paz, "Boy" Ortega and I forget who else from Tucson was there. Some of these guys were in supplies. They claimed I had lucked out. Yeah! I was working a 16-hour day!

Of course, I was learning something all the time. Some of the stuff I learned, I'd probably never use again. Like, for instance, I learned to rig loads for a crane. But it was good experience for a 17-year old.

Unbeknown to me, my mother found out that 17-year olds were being kept out of combat and she wrote to the Department of the Navy, telling them I had lied about my age. Maybe that's why they kept me in the states.

Around December, I was sent to Camp Pendleton for advanced combat training, sort-of like being double promoted. I never went to boot camp. That was a three-month grind of learning heavy weapons and winter training. The last two weeks, we were bused out to the mountains around Bear Lake. We were dropped off in an area with snow up to our butts.

They told us, "Men, this is home! Make it livable."

We pitched shelter-halves and shivered through the day. At night, the "aggressors" would pull raids on us and knock down our pup tents. We beat up a couple of them, just to show them we didn't like it too well. After a week of that, we were ready to go into combat, just to get away from the cold.

Shortly after that, we prepared to leave for Korea. I wish I could remember more details about that. "Challo" Franco could probably clue you in. He has a better memory. He was with me. You know, you go through so many adventures and you say, "I'll never forget this." But in time, you do.

Our ship was the Aikin Victory, manned by merchant seamen. We anchored in Kobe Bay and we were anticipating liberty there. I guess the captain got tired of waiting for the pilot to take the ship in and decided to do it himself. Well, he was doing all right until he ran into the dock, damaging it extensively. The harbor master was so pissed, he ran him off, all the way to Korea. So much for liberty in Japan!

So, we debarked at Pusan, Korea. I had gone through the Advanced Infantry Training Program at Camp Pendleton, the whole course; infantry tactics, mortars, machine guns, rocket launchers, anything having to do with infantry. I was ready for any hole they had to plug up in the infantry. So what do they do? They put me in the artillery with the 11th Marines.

Driving from Pusan to the front lines took us all day. Along the way, we passed an encampment where someone was shouting, "Anybody from Tucson?" It was Tommy Price. I waved as we went by. It was 7 o'clock at night and pitch black when we arrived at our destination. I was fast asleep when a 105th battery cut loose on a firing mission. Talk about a rude awakening! They were just 100 yards from us.

They assigned me to headquarters with the artillery. I probably saw as many 155s and 105s as you did. I was never assigned to a battery. I was assigned to Fire Direction Center. That's where all the firing missions come in. From there, they were directed to a

particular battery that was going to carry it out. I looked at all the charts and technical stuff around and thought to myself, "Am I going to be cooped up in this tent for a whole year?" So, I asked if there was something else. I wound up at flash-and-sound-range, sort of a forward observer that is supposed to detect artillery visually or with sound waves. We'd be attached to front line troops most of the time, but sometimes we'd be all by ourselves on a tall hill.

On one occasion, I was with some of the guys from Tucson: Gasper Eldridge, Arnulfo Mares and "Fanel" Gallardo. I was sitting in a bunker with Gasper when a couple of Corsairs came to plaster the hill in front of us. "Look, Gasper! Isn't that purty?" I said, as some napalm exploded. He says, "Yeah, they're celebrating my birthday." It was October 14th of 1951. When I first arrived at that hill, I was climbing up to the top when I saw this guy coming down. He was wearing bright red lumberjack socks that stuck over the top of his boots. His walk was familiar to me and sure enough, it was Gasper. That guy had a knack for lightening up the situation with his demeanor, if not his guitar playing.

We had a real fine colonel for an officer. He really looked out for his men, especially us with the forward observers. When we got our beer ration, he always made it a point to save some for the front-line troops. One time, when I got back from my post, I had seven cases of beer waiting for me. Another time, roaming through the rear echelon area, we spotted an electric generator, which belonged to the dentist. So we came back on a moonlight requisition and

In a photo released by the U.S. Marines, 1st Division Marines relax by a Korean hut after destroying an enemy sniper housed there, Sept. 24, 1951. (Department of Defence / T. Sgt. Frank W. Sewell)

took it for lighting up our rear post. Our colonel knew what we had done but he never said anything.

I ran into my cousin, "Quiqui" Parra, when he came through our lines sometime in April of 1951. He was an ammo carrier with a machine-gun platoon in the 7th Marines. When I saw him again, we were in a rest area. He was already a squad leader. This was in May. The process of elimination was working.

I never knew where I was at in Korea. We had hill numbers but that didn't tell me anything. The biggest city I saw was Chunchon and we burned it to the ground. Of course, we never had an R&R but the Army did. They even got to go all the way to Japan for their R&R. Must have been nice.

In October, I was wounded. Four of us were headed for the outpost. We were walking single file about 12 or 15 feet apart when out of the comer of my eye, I saw this flash. Next thing I knew, we were picking ourselves up off the ground. The two guys in front were unhurt. The guy in front of me had his knee blown off and I had been peppered with shrapnel up and down my left side. A big chunk of wood was torn away from my carbine stock. I was bleeding from a head wound.

When Tim Ryan saw me, he said, "Damn, Ed! You've been hit!"

He went to get up to help me and fell flat on the ground. He didn't know his knee was missing. They sent one of those bubble-nose choppers to pick us up, the kind with the stretchers on the skids. I told them I wasn't that seriously hurt, that I would take the ambulance. The risk factor of the helicopter being shot down did not appeal to me.

I never knew whether Tim lost his leg or not. It's sad that you can become so close to your buddies that you would risk your life for them and next minute they're out of the picture for good.

I wound up in a field hospital in the rear next to an army artillery eight-inch battery. It was certainly not the place for someone suffering from shell shock. The doctor decided not to take most of the shrapnel out. He said it would do more damage than good.

I was assigned a cot in a ward where I saw this guy with a cast in one arm and a mop in the other. I asked, "What are you doing?" He answered, "What do you think? We have to keep this place clean. It's going to be your turn next." I thought, "Bull - - - - ! I'm not going to be mopping floors."

I went to see the doctor to tell him I wanted out of there. So he gave me some antibiotics and instructions for changing the bandages and I hitched a ride back to my unit. I had it easy for about a week then went back to my regular duties. This was in October of 1951.

In February of 1952, I came off the line. My time was up. We were trucked to the seashore where an LST was beached.

This sergeant came up to us and said, "See that ship anchored out there? Well, that's going to take you to Japan, and you see this LST? This is going to take you to that ship, but before it can do that, it has to be unloaded. So get busy!"

They had taken away all our cold-weather gear. All we had was field jackets. We worked all day and had to sleep on the LST well deck that night. It was cold and miserable! The next day, we finished unloading and were taken to that nice transport that took us to Japan. We thought, "Boy, this is going to be nice, riding this ship all the way home." At Kobe we were given liberty. The first thing we were going to do was go to a nice restaurant and order a big steak with all the trimmings. But instead, we went on to the second thing. Civilization was great! We never did get our steak.

The sad part was when we were told we were going home on the Aikin Victory, the same scow we had taken coming over. We didn't mind that much. It was taking us home!

After the usual medical checkup in San Diego, I was released from active duty.

I went back to work at the ice plant when I got back home. Larry Esquivel was there, too. He had beat me home when he was wounded. Manny Palomino and his brother also worked there. Our boss was great! He told us that if we wanted to go back to school, we could pick our own hours to work. He went by the honor system. He'd pay us for eight hours. It was up to us to give him eight hours work. Most of the Korean vets working there graduated from college. I took a few college courses but passed up a good chance to get a degree.

I worked for the railroad for about three months until they shut down. I also worked as an electrician and for Hughes Aircraft Company. In 1955, I had applied for a job with the fire department. One day, I passed the fire station by the library on Sixth Avenue. Rudy Arriaga and Tony Cordova were out there and they asked me if I didn't want to work for the fire department. They had been trying to get a hold of me for six months. So, I worked for them for 25 years and retired as a battalion chief at age 47. A year later, I went to work for Hughes again. I was there 13-and-a-half years and retired as manager of Fire Protection and Physical Security with about 100 people under me.

I think I owe the Marine Corps a vote of thanks. It instilled in me self-confidence and self-discipline, which helped me throughout my civilian life. One time, I went before the promotional board to see if I qualified as a captain. They asked me why I thought I was prepared. I told them I knew I was prepared when I made corporal in the Marine Corps. I got my captaincy. It's amazing how much weight having been in the Corps carries on a resume or work application.

In a photo by Tucsonan Cpl. Eugene Suarez, a young Marine finds a moment of quiet and solitude in which to offer up a prayer for the safety of himself and his comrades. Minutes later, the 1st Marine Division launched an offensive against entrenched communist troops, 1951. (*National Archives / 127-N-A156900)*

An excerpt from

KOREA AND MEXICANOS:
The Invisible Minority in a Forgotten War

By Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez, Ph.D.
Motorola Presidential Professor of Neighborhood Revitalization; Professor of Transborder Studies and School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University

Director, School of Transborder Studies Gene Suarez walked into my house in the late afternoon on 22 W. Columbia St. in Tucson, Ariz. about 1954. He was a strikingly handsome man with finely chiseled, dark Aztec features, dressed in a pale blue suit accompanied by a white Gant, button-down shirt, and Brooks Brothers regimental tie. He nervously looked about at my mother's bric-a-brac Mexican stuff on the shelves and complimented her on the arrangement of plastic flowers set in the tiny bronze vases. He had come over to meet my parents since he and my sister Lucy met a few months before and they seemed to have hit it off well since then. My sister was a tall, elegant-looking blond, blue-eyed Mexican and often was confused for a gringa by everyone without their realizing that most of the Velez clan were of the fair-haired and light-eyed stock that populated Sonora and suffered from this racial advantage.

Left to Right: Corporal Eugene Suarez, with an 8mm camera and fellow Tucsonans, Tom Price, Jimmy Ward, and Valdemar Leon, 1951. (Image courtesy of Eddie "Mickey" Rios / photographer unknown)

I sensed that Gene was different that day from her other *pretendientes* because he exuded a seriousness and a nervousness that I couldn't pin down—that is, until my mother handed him a cup of coffee and accompanying saucer and spoon. It was hard for him to hold them in his hands since both trembled awkwardly and embarrassed quickly put cup and saucer down on the living room table. No one said anything and like the newly teen aged jerk that I was, asked why he shook so much. He smiled and said: that he had been ill and was recuperating. They soon married and a year later had a great looking kid, Gene Junior.

I later found out that Gene was a former Marine who had spent more than a year in combat as [one of only two] Chicano combat photographers in the

Marine Corps and had seen and captured the most vicious of combat against North Koreans and their Chinese allies. He had had his cameras exploded from his hands, and he had been blown up in the air by a Chinese artillery shell and set down literally without an external scratch, and barely escaped from the 300,000 or so Chinese troops at the Chosin Reservoir by leaping into a tank and then shooting the Chinese off of other tanks. He had returned scarred by the memories, but also scarred by the still and motion pictures he took including these before and during combat in Kojo. …

These are realities that have never been told and are difficult to recite … The task is in fact to create new ethno histories of Mexicanos in Korea. We do not have them and the smattering of published works is very scant. … There are essays, short stories and poetry by the survivors of lost fathers and returned fathers who lived in the midst of the ravages of what we now call post-traumatic stress.

Obviously, a major oral historical project must be undertaken and I offer you here an example of work already done by my *compadres* and fellow former Marines of the Marine Corps League Unit in Tucson who have developed their own oral history project on E Company, 13th Infantry Battalion, USMCR of which 113 served in Korea. Called up in June of 1950, these mostly *Chavalones*, as I referred to them, from the barrios of Tucson, left Tucson some with little or no training but proceeded to land in Inchon, fight in Seoul and outfought every major Chinese attack at the Chosin Reservoir and fought their way back, outnumbered 10 to 1.

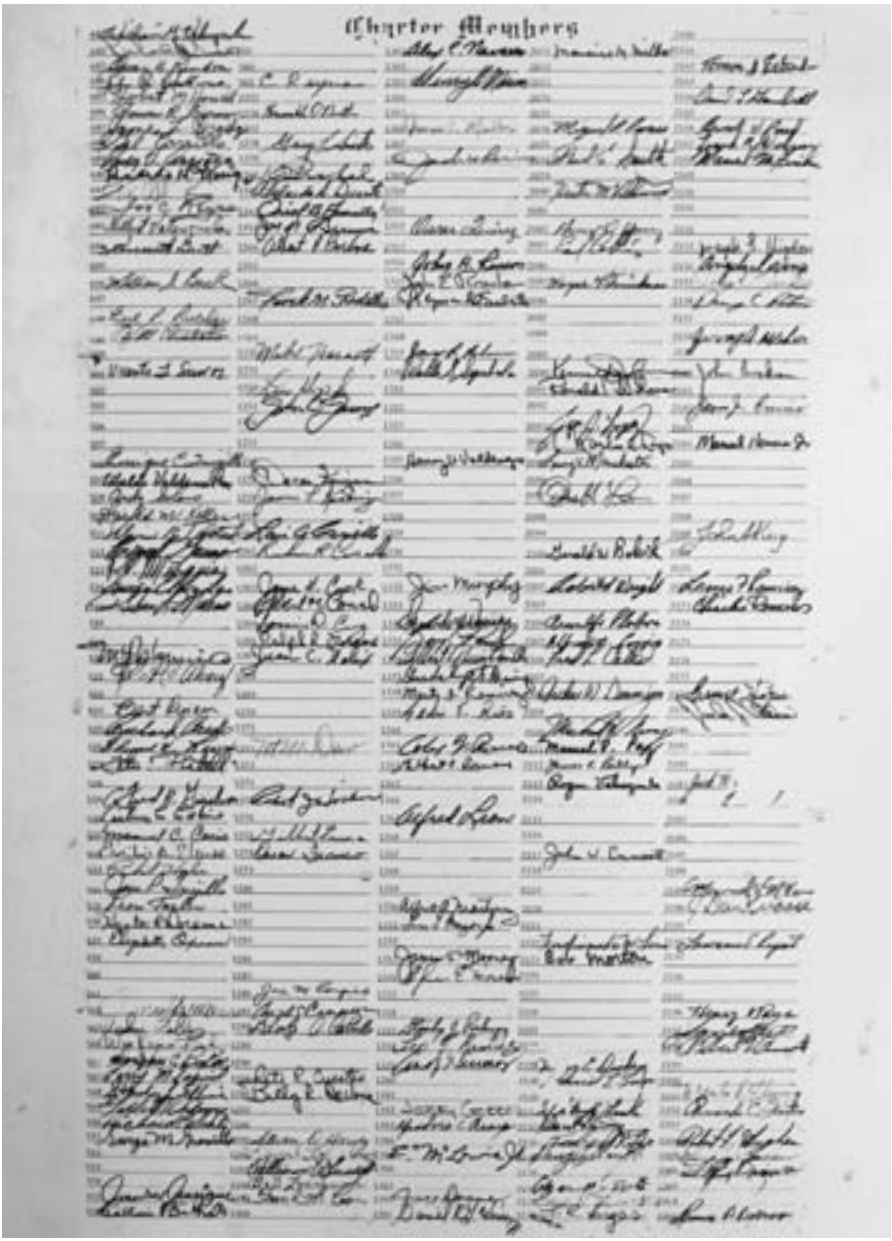
They were awarded one Navy Cross, eight Silver Stars, seven Bronze Stars, 47 Purple Hearts and two Letters of Commendation Medals. Thus, of those serving in Korea, these barrio Marines suffered almost 50 percent casualties in dead and wounded.

However, it is in their rendering of themselves in their oral histories where we barely begin to comprehend the terribleness and magnificence of their sacrifices…

These seemingly matter-of-fact oral histories many times mask the deep painful memories of their actions and, for me, it has been an honor to have had the opportunity to have known them. I joined the same Marine reserve company, 10 years after they came back, and I was initially trained by many of these veterans, which later kept me alive and mostly well in later events.

Vélez-Ibáñez, Carlos G. (2009, October 2-3). Excerpted from *Korea and Mexicanos; The invisible Minority in a Forgotten War*. Paper presented at the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project 10th Anniversary Dinner and Korean and Vietnam War-Era Symposium

The charter document for the Tucson Marine Corps League Detachment 007, 1970
(Latino Perspectives / Charles Sanderson)

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CAMP JOSEPH H PENDLETON

THEY WERE JUST BOYS.

They went from carrying books to class in Tucson's warm desert heat to fighting for survival in the biting cold of a Korean winter. Stranded between bone-jarring mortar shells and the heartbreaking loss of friends and limbs, they changed from high school boys to U.S. Marines before their 20th birthdays. The Korean War took their youth and turned them into men, for better or for worse. Here we share their stories.

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